

彼女はやつぱり
気づかない6

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I Really Don't Notice

vol.6

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「今日は本当に楽しかった。本当に本当に楽しかった」

僕はやつぱり
気づかない6







Prologue

“The readers cannot go against the author.”

He said.

It was rare, coming from the man fuzzier and less graspable than the clouds, with a gentle nature like the light filtering in through the trees—a clear, definitive, declarative tone.

“Whether it be novel or manga—within the stories of the world, the production’s side holds an absolute advantage. The story rests on the author’s palm through and through. All the reader can do, if anything, is read through the tale the author presents, and hand down their verdict of interesting or drab.”

“You think so? I don’t know the specifics, but are you sure the author is free to write whatever tickles their fancy? Surely there’s the editor’s opinion, and the changing times and such.”

“You’ve got to dream bigger. You’re definitely right about that, but that’s not what I was talking about. More conceptual, more abstract... meaning what I’m doing right here is speaking arbitrarily to set a mood.”

He said with a wry smile, “Getting back on topic,” he went on.

“In the end, the readers are nothing more than a thorough passive. No matter how much they adore a story, by no means can they ever intervene in it.”

“What do you mean?”

“In short, regardless of how they detest the developments or conclusion, they are unable to rewrite the events. Once they’re done reading, they can toss the book against the wall, or write curses addressed to the author, but they are unable to add their hand to the story.”

Well that’s obvious, I accepted.

We readers can only read the story we’ve been given. Of course, there’s the take that a work exists as one with its fans, but even so, there’s surely a hopeless gap between author and reader. There exists insurmountable wall between the side that confers, and the side that receives.

And that is—in my opinion—a wall that should never be surmounted.

“To put it more simply, more easy to understand—”

Said he.

“The author is God.”

I tilted my head.

“Don’t you think God would be the readers in this case? See, they often say you should treat customers like God.”

“Hahah. You have a point there.”

He laughed. Bitter and sweet, his usual smile.

“What’s up with you? You’re biting back especially hard today.”

Just as he said, today, for some reason, I was doing nothing but refuting him. Usually, half understanding, half not, I’d somehow or another think, “If he’s saying that, it must be true,” with nothing but nods from my side. For some reason, today, I felt like refuting.

Yes, refuting... I felt like rebelling.

His mood unaffected by my advances, he quietly continued his piece.

“While the reader can be no more than a receiver of the story... there is but one means of approach at their possession impossible for the author to interfere with. That would be reading speed.”

“Reading speed...”

“The reader is able to enjoy the story at whatever speed they desire. Whether they take in each passage or skim the page, that’s all up to them. Whether they skip over all the speech bubbles of a manga, or read only a novel’s dialogue, skipping over all the narrative, there is nothing an author can do.”

Meaning, he said.

“Deciding where to stick their bookmark in the story is the reader’s special right.”

“Bookmark...”

“The bookmark is something the author... God can’t do anything about. The act of sticking in a bookmark is an action independent of his work.”

“.....”

“An action the reader can do, and the author cannot. A means humans can accomplish yet God is unable. The means only God can never obtain... the hand invisible to god is what it is.”

“The hand invisible to god? Umm, that was Adam Smith, was it?”

“Wrong, wrong. I coined that one. Of course, I was parodying Adam Smith’s ‘Invisible Hand of God’ from ‘The Wealth of Nations’, I’ll admit.”

He gave a merry laugh.

“That’s why I named her The Cage of Death Remnant and had it read Orino Shiori. That’s why I named her ability 《Bookmarker》.

“I wanted to make her the existence to stick a bookmark in this world.”

That was where our story began.

As if to ridicule everything that came before it as a preface, the story accelerated in its development.

Finally...

Finally, it all began to move.

No—that’s wrong.

It wasn’t beginning to move now.

That’s why it wasn’t ‘finally’, perhaps I should say ‘at last’.

It had all begun long, long ago.

The simple fact was that I never noticed.

Chapter 1: Surprise

“Ladies, gentlemen, I applaud you for coming out in the meager remainder of summer vacation”

Kagurai-senpai looked over us and said with a grin.
Today was such a day with only three days of summer vacation lying ahead of it. The curtain opens at the casual diner in front of the station. We had been gathered in the no-smoking section at the back.

“What is it, Kagurai. Did you need us to help out with your homework?”

The one who pierced through with a cold and cynical attitude towards her senior was my classmate, Kikyouin Yuzuki-san. On this fine day, her hair was once again set in her charm-point ponytail.

“Kikyouin-senpai. Kagurai-senpai’s in a different school year than the rest of us. I don’t think we’ll be able to help.”

Putting in a gentle retort with a serene tone, the mechanical lubricant and conscience of our club, Kurisu Crimson Kuria. As she stirred up her melon soda, carefully making sure not to spill it, her form was oh so adorable.

“But doesn’t that sound like the sort of thing Kagurai would come out with?”
“Ahh...”

“No, dear Kurisu. Don’t clam up there. If you’re going to follow through for me, do it to the end...”

Lamenting with a dubious expression was the president of our club, Kagurai Monyumi-senpai. While her hair was once long and beautiful, when she returned home the other day, she had resolutely cut it short.

“... Good grief. Oy, Kagoshima. You say something. These two are lacking in their respect for me.”

The talk was turned towards our club vice-president in name alone, Kagoshima Akira—meaning me. I was lightly surprised by Kagurai-senpai’s statement.

"Huh? You're telling me you didn't gather us up to get us to help out with your homework?"

"You too!?"

"I was certain of it, so I brought a few things from home... an electric dictionary, and few books you could write reports on and..."

"And you weren't even joking!? You're casually the cruelest one of all!"

I was seriously worried for her, but from what I could see of her grandiose grievances, it did seem my intentions had missed the mark.

"You lot... what made you think a summons from me equals helping out my studies?"

I can only think it was her daily karma. This person's not quite there when it comes to anything apart from computers, after all. Kagurai-senpai made a declaration to us in a voice conceived in slight resentment.

"I'll admit, I've yet to complete a majority of my summer homework, but that's not what I called you here for!"

... So in the end, she's not done, we retorted in our hearts.

By the way, I myself had a majority of it done by yesterday.

A week ago, there was a turn of events that led to Kurisu-chan living with me, but since then, I earnestly wrestled with it and managed somehow or another. Rather, when I convinced myself, "I'll have to go at it like my life depends on it, or it'll never be over," and actually went at it like my life depended on it, it actually felt like I had finished with time to spare. I really am a man who's terrible at pacing himself.

"Then what did you call us out for?"

"Why Orino's birthday, of course."

I immediately understood as the words left her mouth. I see. No wonder Orino-san wasn't present. I thought she was late, or perhaps had to leave her seat for some reason, but... I guess she wasn't called from the start.

"Orino's birthday... when was that again?"

"August thirty first."

"August thirty first... that's the day after tomorrow, ain't it?"

Kikyouin-san opened her eyes wide.

"That's right. The day after tomorrow. And the last day of summer vacation to boot." Said Kagurai-senpai. "Therefore, once August thirty first comes around, I was thinking we of the computer club would hold a birthday party for her."

"That sounds nice... but also quite sudden."

Three days left of summer vacation, and Orino-san's birthday was the day after next.

[2 PAGE SPREAD OF THE MEMBERS GATHERED AT A RESTAURANT]

When we went shopping the other day, Kagurai-senpai did say something about Orino-san's birthday, but I didn't hear another word until this very day. I was sure we were going to do something once the new semester had begun.

"Honestly, I'd have liked to set up the plan a bit earlier. But even if it is over summer break, it's the last day. So I was sure there would be members who hadn't finished their homework yet..."

"I'm almost done with mine."

"Finished ages ago."

"Me too. Ah, Orino-senpai said she already finished up before training camp."

"... I-I see. How wonderful. As the president of the ComClub, I'm proud of all of you."

Kagurai-senpai's voice was clearly shaking. It does seem that of these face, the only one who hadn't finished her homework was none other than her. Her face as a senpai was run through the mud.

"W-whatever the case, I hesitated over whether to leave the final day open for any last sprints of homework, but yesterday, I resolved I would hold this party."

She set herself up in a machine gun tone, before continuing on calmly.

"A birthday really should be celebrated on the day in question, after all."

While she said something nice with a nice smile, the three of us calmly analyzed the situation. Don't tell me this person... is using Orino-san's birthday as an excuse not to do homework? Just because she realized there was no way she'd manage in her three days remaining, she wanted to escape reality with a

birthday party?

Seeming to sense our eyes of doubt, faltered back.

“W-what? I-if you have any objections, raise them now.”

“No, I have no complaints.”

Said I. Even if there was a bit of escapism included in, I doubt Kagurai-senpai’s desire to celebrate Orino-san’s birthday was a lie. And I felt much the same.

“Let’s do it, this surprise party.”

BREAK

And so the three of us left the diner, and made for the department store in front of the station.

That department store was the largest large-scale retailer in the area, and if you made your way to it, you’d be able to obtain roughly anything.

“For now, that should take care of the birthday cake reservations.”

After making reservations for a whole cake at the patisserie on the first floor (splitting the cost). Kagurai-senpai folded her arms, and grunted an ‘indeed’.

“When you think of birthday, you think of cake, so that’s one cake down... now then, what’s next?”

“Huh? You didn’t have some specific plan?”

“That’s right. At present, I haven’t thought of anything. I just thought I’d gather everyone up so we could put our heads together.”

“Now that sounds hit or miss...”

When she had the aptitude to mobilize, she hadn’t the slightest ability to plan.

“And this is the first time I’m doing this sort of thing.”

“This sort of thing?”

“This birthday party thing. I’ve seen it time and again in games, but it’s the first time I’m doing one for real. In my era... ah, no, yeah. Well, whatever the case, I’ve no experience.”

“Is that so?”

When I answered,

“Ah, the truth is, I’ve also...”

“I’ve never had one either.”

Kurisu-chan and Kikyouin-san both raised their hands.

“Eh? Both of you?”

“Yes. It’s not as if I’m inexperienced in celebrating birth in itself, but I’m not very knowledgeable on what sort of thing constitutes a birthday party in this country.”

“I see... you did just come to Japan this spring.”

Thought I’ve yet to hear where she was before she came to Japan. I’ve grown curious and asked a number of times, but each time, “Umm, that’s a secret,” she’d either play it off, or, “I’m from another world—ah, i-it’s nothing, I didn’t say anything!” she would return an eighth-grade-syndrome response, so lately, I’ve just about given up.

“What about you, Kikyouin-san? You didn’t have any opportunities to hold a birthday party?”

When I nonchalantly asked, Kikyouin-san awkwardly cast down her eyes. I could see a daaaark shadow cast over her back.

“... That’s right. Never.”

Ah, crap. Did I step on a landmine?

Come to think of it, Kikyouin-san was-put nicely a loner, and put not-so-nicely, a girl who had spent her student life alone. I don’t know the specifics, but I’m sure she lived through a world with no relation to peaceful birthday gatherings.

“... Ah, no, but I wasn’t lonely at all or anything. Every year, I’d make some Japanese confectionaries together with Tamane-sama.”

Kikyouin-san frantically put up a tough act. It was kinda cute.

“Meaning, the only one with birthday party experience here is Kagoshima.”

Kagurai-senpai said, somewhat resigned.

“No, it’s not like I have that sort of experience either. At most, I’ve been called to a friend’s house a few times in elementary school.”

“But you’re definitely more knowledgeable than us, right? Very well, I’ll make it

a presidential order. Vice-president, Kagoshima Akira. You are to take charge of Orino's birthday party."

I just got appointed to the role with the most responsibility. Even if she wanted me to take charge, it wasn't as if I was a birthday party professional...

"Whether Orino's birthday party is a success or not all hinges on Kagoshima."
"Don't lay down the pressure."

Kagurai-senpai grinned as she stimulated my sense of responsibility; I tried thinking over what it meant to have a birthday party once more.

"Let's see. The essence of a birthday party—"

I desperately shook up the memories of the birthday party at a friend's house I participated in during elementary school. Umm, how did it go again? Their mother prepared the cake and the feast, we prepared the sort of presents a child would give... but in the end, if you're asking what we did...

BREAK

"—It's got to be Smash Bros."

BREAK

""""Smash Bros!?""""

The three cried out with expressions of terror.

"K-Kagoshima. The meaning of a birthday party is Smash Bros...?"

As Kagurai-senpai asked in a quivering cadence, I gave a heavy nod.
Right.

Now that I think back on it, all those friends' birthdays I went to were all just times people gathered under the name of a party to hold a Smash Bros tournament.

Everyone got together for a merry climactic battle.

The time we spent gaming was far longer than anything spent on any birthday-ish events.

"In this country, a birthday party is where everyone gathers to play Smash Bros, or in some instances, Pro Evolution Soccer. This is a well-known fact that's surely written into the dictionary definition."

"Haah..." The three of them looked impressed.
... No, I was making a joke there, don't look at me like that.
These three inexperienced in the way of the birthday seriously believed my nonsense, so I hurriedly moved to get things back on track.

"W-well, it's not like a birthday party has any definite form in the first place.
As long as everyone has fun, isn't that all that matters?"

"I see. You have a point there."

Kagurai-senpai assented, the other two nodded.

"For now, I think a cake and presents are indispensable."

"Hmm. The cake's been bought, which means next comes presents."

"In that case, shouldn't we just buy them here and now?"

Kikyouin-san took a sweeping look along the store interior as she said.

"This department store sells everythin'. If you search, I'm sure you'll find whatever you're lookin' for."

BREAK

We entered present buying time.

At first, we intended to all move as one but, "Isn't that kinda embarrassing?" came the verdict, and we dispersed into independent action. After deciding we would meet up in an hour at the rest area on the first floor, each member started shopping as they pleased.

"Now then..."

I boarded the escalator bound for the second floor, and worked my head. A present for Orino-san, eh. Now what would that be? I don't have a clue what would be a good thing to get her. On top of that, my budget isn't anything special. I didn't intend to go out and by a present today, so I didn't put much in my wallet when I went out; what's more, my low funding was already shaved down from the cost of that cake...

While I was busy mulling over it, the escalator reached the second floor.

"You're late."

And for some reason, there was Kikyouin-san. Folding her arms, she

complained to me with a displeased fate.

“Can’t you get up any quicker?”

“... Eh? What do you mean I’m late?”

It’s not like we were meeting up or anything. We didn’t have any prior arrangements to look for a present together.

“I was waitin’ here. For you to arrive.”

“Eh...”

She was waiting?

For me to ride the escalator up?

“I wanted to be alone with ya’ a bit.”

Being told that in a level face sent me into a fluster.

W-what’s up with Kikyouin-san?

Whenever our faces met, a tongue click or a sigh, if I called her name, I’d be ignored eight out of ten, and if I teased her just a bit, she would immediately punch me in the stomach (granted, the solution to that one is just don’t tease her), and that prickly girl wanted to be alone with me...

Is this what the world calls the coming of the dere...

No—that’s wrong!

“W-who are you!?”

“... Hah?”

“There’s no way Kikyouin-san would ever show me such dere! You may take her form to deceive me, but I won’t be—”

I was punched in the stomach.

“Fguh...”

I suppressed my belly with both hands as I writhed.

“That plainly effective output, that angle with full knowledge of the location of my solar plexus, and the very slight, subtle undertones of love... this punch truly is Kikyouin-san’s...”

“Just how much are you reading into my punches!? ‘n wait, I’m not sendin’ em with love!”

"Hm. Her specialty violent retort, and her art of snapping... this truly is the real Kikyouin-san."

"Just what criteria are you using to define me!?"

Letting out a breath of relief, I pat my stomach.
I folded up my T-shirt, and took out the volume of Corocoro Comics I had stuck under it.

Praise the heavens, thanks to the Corocoro, I got off with little to no damage.

"—Why do you have Corocoro stored around your stomach!?"

Kikyouin-san said, amazed.

She had gone passed surprise, more creeped out at this point.

"Yes, well you see, lately, whenever I know I'm going to be meeting you, I generally prepare myself."

"Why!?"

"I mean, you're always quick to punch me."

"That's because you make sure to do things that'll get you a punch!"

I had no rebuttal to that one.

I mean, teasing Kikyouin-san is fun.

"Ah, fudge... if I knew you had a magazine there, I would've hit you more seriously."

Clenching her fist, Kikyouin-saan irritantly lamented.

"Fu fu fu. Kikyouin-san, you've got a long way to go. Well, no matter how hard you strike me, I do think I'll get off with no damage."

When I got up high and ran my mouth, "... Oh?" Kikyouin-san's temple twitched as she glared angrily at me.

"You're actin' all proud just because you ate one healthy serving. Do you even understand how much I'm usually holdin' back with you?"

Of course, I was quite well aware. Kikyouin-san had brute force on a level one might think she was taking on Youkai every day. But today's me was a new man. I was accompanied by my comrade of over ten years.

"Kikyouin-san, I'd be insulted if you grouped Corocoro with all those other

magazines on the block. This page number that far exceeds Jump or Shonen Magazine... boasting a top-class thickness among all the numerous monthly publications, a punch this baby can't block doesn't exist."

"Hmm, wanna test that theory?"

"Oh, now that sounds interesting."

It had kinda become an air where I couldn't pull back, so I accepted without due consideration. I fastened the Corocoro to my abdomen again and touched my hands to my hips to take on an intimidating pose. Before my eyes, Kikyouin-san tightly clenched her right fist, and pulled back. Winding her slender body to its absolute limit, she made free use of the spring of her entire body to prepare herself. On my back, and my stomach pushed against the CoroCoro binding... I felt an ominous sweat.

... This is bad, Kikyouin-san's going all out. What do I do, could it be I just erected a tremendous death flag?

"U-umm... Kikyouin-san...?"

"RinByouTouShaKaiJinRetsuZaiZen."

She's not listening!

And wait, isn't she kinda chanting something!?

An unfathomable power was concentrating itself on Kikyouin-san's right fist... was the feeling I got. If I had to stick a sound effect to it, it was a 'whhnneeeEEEE!' sort of feel.

C-crap. If I don't tense my muscles... no, guard like a rock, I'm screwed!

"... Here I go."

At the attack proclamation, I swallowed my spit.
I concentrated every bit of my consciousness on my abdomen.
Believe, you must believe in the CoroCoro Comics!

"... Hah!"

Kikyouin-san released all her power, driving into the pit of my stomach a—

BREAK

"Hey, mommy, what are those people doing?"

BREAK

.....
.....
I suddenly recalled where we were.

The second floor of a department store. Right next to the escalator.
Right before my eyes was the toy section.

"H-hey. Don't make eye contact."

Pulling the hand of a child, around four or five, a mother swiftly walked past.

"....."

"....."

"... Kikyouin-san."

"... What?"

"You really shouldn't hit people."

"You're right. I'll do my utmost to restrain myself next time."

We both undid our preparations for war, returning to our normal stances.
Yep. Let's pretend none of that ever happened.

"So anyways, Kikyouin-san. In the end, what did you mean when you said you wanted me alone?"

I nonchalantly returned to topic.

"It's this, this right here."

She said, and held out a brown envelope to me. When I took it and opened it up, I found it contained three ten thousand yen bills.

"Could this be..."

"Right. That Tsuchimikado finally got up to returnin' it. Finally found some funds to spare, apparently."

Tsuchimikado Senzou.

A con artist who tricked me a few months ago.

I see, I finally understood Kikyouin-san's intent in isolating me. I never told Kagurai-senpai or Kurisu-chan I had money taken from me.

"Yes, I've definitely received thirty thousand yen. Tell Tsuchimikado-san I said thanks."

"Why are you thanking him...? You might have forgotten, but that money was tricked off of you."

"Ah, you're right... yaaaah. But hey, just thank him anyways. It was all thanks to Tsuchimikado-san that we were able to go to training camp and all."

"That's true, but,"

Kikyouin-san sighed with a discontent face.

"... 'n wait, you don't need to thank that guy. If you left him be, he totally planned to keep you waiting another year or so. I had to pester him again and again before he finally forked it over..."

"You kept pestering him?"

"... Yeah."

"I see. Then it's thanks to you. Thank you."

"... Shut it. I don't need your thanks. I just can't stand it when the score ain't set straight..."

"Yeah. I know. That's why, thank you."

"... Tsk."

Kikyouin-san clicked her tongue, turning her face away. I transferred the thirty thousand yen to my wallet. In a sense, it came at the perfect time. It now seemed I could manage to afford a present for Orino-san.

"Come to think of it, have you decided what you're going to get her?"

"Not yet. I'll just wander around, 'n get her what catches my eye. You?"

"I'm still thinking about it. This sort of thing's surprisingly difficult."

"You don't look like the sort that'd understand a woman's heart, after all."

Kikyouin-san gave a mocking laugh, so I sullenly responded.

"Your words do me ill. Choosing a present for a woman is a piece of cake for a gentleman such as I."

I've given Orino-san a stomach wrap—or what I mistook as one, and in the end she got a hair band—before, and in addition to that...

"I gave you a diaper, didn't I?"

Crash.

Kikyouin-san slipped, her body stuck straight into the toy shelf.

“What are you doing? Ah, look at the mess you’ve made.”

Kind as I was, I began cleaning up the toys scattered across the ground. But without showing any gratitude for me, Kikyouin-san shouted out with a bright-red face.

“How long are you going to drag that joke out!?”

“What? It’s not a joke, we’re talking about your maniac fetish, aren’t—”

“You seriously think that!?”

“? Well, yes I seriously do, I’m seriously worried for you, but... to each their own, so it’s not good to hold a prejudice, is how I see it.”

“You’re tolerant in the strangest places!”

“Ah, of course, I haven’t spoken to anyone on the matter, and I have no intent to do so. No need to worry.”

I stuck up my thumb.

“It’s our little secret.”

“... Well. Thaaanks. For. That...”

For some reason, Kikyouin-san’s face twitched, its expression one on the verge of snapping.

“... You don’t have to make that scary face... next time I get you a present, I’ll make sure to get you Mooneyman instead of Pampers.”

“Is that all you took from it!?”

“Eh? Did your taste in paper diapers change?”

“Just shut it already!”

Kikyouin-san’s punched my stomach at the speed of sound.

“But I have my CoroCoro, so it doesn’t work!”

“Ah, god, this guy is a pain!”

Snapping with teary eyes, Kikyouin-san attacked my rear with a full-force Thai Roundhouse.

But I have my diaper, so it doesn’t work!

... Is what I wanted to say, but that wasn’t my fetish, so it hurt enough to bring tears to my eyes.

BREAK

While I was holding my bottom, hazy in agony, Kikyouin-san had disappeared off somewhere, so as was the initial plan, I looked around for a present on my own. I started with a stop to the ladies' fashion corner on the third floor. I immediately regretted that decision.

"... Whoah."

I was enraptured in an immense sense I was playing an away game. What is it, this out of place feeling? The numerous glittering stores expanding before my eyes. The entire floor engendered a no-boys-allowed air.

A man loitering around alone would likely invite in cold eyes. Well, I didn't think that was being overly self-conscious, but whatever the case, I was just that nervous. A man like me was never meant to set foot on this floor.

I got the feeling the kind adventurer in my heart was telling me, "Are you sure you'll be alright with that equipment?" In RPG terms, this was an area where monsters clearly outside my level range would appear... what one might call as that feeling that I should go level myself up somewhere before I came back. I'll raise my man power a bit more, and come back sometime later. It's too early for me.

Let's go the Men's and Ladies' fifth floor, I considered, when I spotted Kurisu-chan in the store right in front of me.

"Kuuuriisuuu-chan."

I approached and tried calling out.

"Ah, Kagoshima-senpai."

"How are things on your side? Did you choose a present?"

"I'm still mulling over it. You're searching in this area too?"

"I was considering it... but wandering this floor is too high of a hurdle."

"Yeah, it might be a bit harsh for a man. Though it's not like they're not allowed to come."

As Kurisu-chan said, there were some men dotted around the floor. But not a single one of them was alone. They wandered as a set with a woman.

"It's too disheartening alone, so I'm glad I found you. Hey, can I tag along with you a bit?"

"Of course you can."

She readily accepted.

"That's good. I might stick out like a sore thumb on my own, but I'll probably be fine if I'm with you."

"Eh? D-do you mean..."

Kurisu-chan's face turned a little red as she looked around.

"T-t-that me and you look like a—"

"I'm sure everyone will think we're siblings."

"....."

Her budding bloom of an expression instantly turned dark, for some reason she sullenly lowered her shoulders. After that, we aimlessly wandered around the floor.

"Come to think of it."

When we shifted to the second store, I suddenly recalled and asked.

"Did anything happen with Nobuko-san after that?"

The other day, Kurisu-chan met up with her own grandmother. It was the first time she saw her in her life, apparently. The circumstances of the Kurisu House were somewhat complicated, and I didn't understand the half of them, but at the very least, I could comprehend that the meeting was special to Kurisu-chan.

"Truth be told, we went out to play yesterday."

"Oh really?"

She nodded and smiled an ehehe. I never got to ask her what happened once we stopped living together, but it did seem their relationship was more favorable than I had imagined.

"Where did you go?"

When I casually asked, Kurisu-chan's body froze up on the spot.

"U-umm..."

A heavy shadow falling over her head, she struggled to get the words out.

"T-the pachinko parlor..."

"....."

Where is that old lady bringing her own granddaughter...

“I-is that okay?”

“... It wasn’t okay at all. To start with... in the first five minutes, my five thousand yen went up in smoke, and I thought I was going to die... to think such a scary machine existed in the world...”

“.....”

“And then an employee came over to me... No entry to minors, he said ridiculously angry, and drove me out of the store... what’s more, grandma had entered kakuhen, so she couldn’t come to help me.....”

“.....”

(TL: I don’t gamble, so Wikipedia: Most Pachinko machines employ the kakuhen (確変, short for 確率変動 meaning probability change) system, where some percentage of the possible jackpots on the digital slot machine result in the odds of hitting the next jackpot multiplying by a large amount, followed by another spin regardless of the outcome.)

“In the end, it took close to three hours before grandma came out, and I felt like I was waiting for nothing outside of the store...ahaha.”

Kurisu-chan made a smile so dry it took me by surprise.

“B-but Nobuko-san entered kakuhen, right? I’m none too knowledgeable, but that’s a good thing, isn’t it? If she made it big, then it all works out...”

“No... in the end, the machine made off with it all.”

T-there’s no light at the end...

There should be a limit to a bad end.

When I found myself unable to grasp the words to cheer her up, Kurisu-chan breathed a small sigh and regained her smile.

“Well, yesterday was a bit dubious, but in a sense, it was a valuable experience. I think I’ll try inviting her out somewhere next time.”

“You’re right. That sounds best.”

I returned a smile, and the two of us returned to choosing presents. Hmmm. But while it didn’t really bother me, there were some strange scents to be found in ladies’ fashion stores. It was a bit of a new discovery. Do they spray around an aroma?

... Mn?

Aroma?

That's right. Wouldn't a perfume be quite the splendid gift for Orino-san? I get the feeling it's a tad cliché for a gift to a woman. A bit too safe to boot, but in these things, making a display of eccentric individuality is contrarily the path to failure. After parting from Kurisu-chan, I made for a higher floor.

BREAK

After purchasing a nice perfume on the sixth floor, I returned to the meeting spot, the rest area on the first floor. It was a bit ahead of schedule, but I decided to arrive first and wait for the others.

That's what I thought when I made my way down, but to my surprise, the space was already occupied.

'Twas Kagurai-senpai.

Resting down on a bench, she was reading a game magazine. From the book-store bag right beside her, I could guess it was a magazine she had just bought.

"Oh, Kagoshima. You're fast."

Noticing me, Kagurai-senpai raised a hand.

"I'm fast... then what does that make you? Did you already buy a present?"
"No, I haven't. I already knew from the start what I was going to give her. I've been waiting here the whole time."

"Oh, is that so."

The one who brought this whole thing up, Kagurai-senpai had prepared a gift beforehand.

"... Wait a second, I'll find something to stick in."

Kagurai-senpai kept the magazine pages pinned down with her fingers as she began rummaging through her bag.

"If you're just leafing through it, why don't you just dogear it?"

"Dogear?"

"You fold down the corner of the page in place of a bookmark."

"Oh, so that's what it's called."

"I hear it's because the folded down page looks like a hanging dog's ear."

Hmm... that's the first I've heard of it. I only knew about a dogear in computer terms.

"That's the one I've never heard of."

While I introduced the proposal, Kagurai-senpai was the type who didn't want her pages folded, even if it was just a magazine, so she used a receipt from her wallet as a bookmark and tucked the book into her bag.

"So what are you going to give her, Kagurai-senpai?"

"Adult games."

Without hesitation, without the slightest attention to public eyes, she said it terribly frankly.

... How should I put it, she really is undeterred.

It seemed she intended to use a present as an excuse to proselytize.

"No ordinary adult game, mind you, it's the Monyumi Best Selection. After careful selection upon careful selection, I've picked out three godly works of art."

"So it's not just one."

"I'd be happy if Orino could use this opportunity to walk the same path as me."

"Please don't pull others down the road of heresy."

"Despite what she says, Orino's seems to be inadvertently interested, so I'm sure she'll be delighted."

Orino-san... seems interested... yeah. Well, I'm sure girls are interested in that sort of thing too. Yep.

And after that, "In the first place, while they're often greatly misunderstood, it's not as if adult games are nothing more than lascivious experiences. Depictions of sexuality are definitely important, but what's important is the process to reach it. The meaning is derived through surmounting those episodes that can't be told without spilt tears, and only then—" Kagurai-senpai started heatedly lecturing, so I quietly stood from my seat and went to buy a drink.

I pushed the button for orange juice. I removed the drink from the port. The number on the machine's roulette game turned—

"... Whoah! I-I won!?"

7777.

Four numbers, in a splendid line.

Amazing, it was the first time in my life I ever won.

I guess you really can win these.

“K-k-K-Kagurai-senpai! I-I-I won, I really won!”

In my rising tensions, I frantically called over to Kagurai-senpai.

“And that’s precisely why what’s commonly referred to as a tearjerker is quite often a—wait, huh!? Kagoshima, when did you get over there...? You weren’t listening to me?”

“That can wait! More importantly, get over here, quick!”

“... More importantly...”

Disheartened as she was, Kagurai-senpai made her way over.

“Look, look! I won! Isn’t that amazing!?”

“Well of course, you’ll win from time to time. If you didn’t, it’d be fraud.”

In contrast to my merry romp, Kagurai-senpai was the epitome of level-headedness.

“I’m sure they’re set to let you win at a set probability. I’ve heard the rate differs from machine to machine, so don’t you think the maker’s considered various things when making it? Like with slot machines?”

“Eh? That’s how slot machines work?”

“Yeah. I’ve never entered a real pachinko parlor, but I’ve played them in games, so I know.”

... So whenever she remembers something, it’s from a game, I thought but didn’t say.

“Rather than whatever happens after you sit down, slots are a game where it’s more important to see just how you can sit at a winning machine. The difference between machines set to win and those that aren’t is intense. The people who make a living from the slots spend their waking hours gathering data to search out a machine they can win at.”

Hmm. I didn’t know.

I was sure it was a game where you arbitrarily sat at an open machine, arbitrarily pressed the button, and where a win was a pure stroke of luck.

"So being strong at the slots doesn't mean you have amazing kinetic vision?"
"That's only in the world of shonen manga. It's not like skill is irrelevant, but no matter how quick one is at the draw, to start with, you won't win if you sit at an unwinning machine."

Yeaah. That's a world I don't really get.
Ah, but now that you mention it, the slots at the casino in pokemon definitely did have machines that were easier to win at, I think.
I see, so it was a casino surprisingly conforming to reality.

"Hmm. Was the slot metaphor hard to get? Umm, for a simpler example of probability manipulation..."

Kagurai-senpai thought a bit before hitting her hands together.

"There's the loot gacha."

"....."

I didn't say anything.
No comment, from me.
I won't take the slightest responsibility for her statement.

"That aside, Kagurai-senpai. I already bought my juice, so you can have the freebie I won."

"Oh, I can? Thank you."

Said Kagurai-senpai, as she reached her hand towards a vending machine button.

But along the way, she came to a stop.

"... Oy, Kagoshima. Take a look."

Her voice was clearly shaking. I looked at the vending machine as instructed—and went speechless.

The light on the buttons had gone out!?

Huh!?

They were lit up to a moment ago!

"Come to think of it... there was a time limit to a win. If you don't make your selection within a set interval, it's made as if you never won at all."
"T-that's the system..."

I crumbled to the ground, pressing my hands against it in depression. Dammit, when it's not as if I actually lost anything, I felt an immense sense of loss.

"Because Kagurai-senpai showed off her useless trivia..."

"Don't pin it on me. In the first place, isn't it your fault for wasting time calling me over? You should've just made a purchase."

"I mean, I wanted to get you a can as a present... and,"

"And?"

"I wanted to share my happiness."

"....."

I heard a sigh. When I raised my face, Kagurai-senpai was making a tired, butter smile.

"You really are something, Kagoshima."

While it was a cynical line, for some reason, it didn't feel harsh on my ears.

BREAK

A few dozen minutes later, once Kikyouin-san and Kurisu-chan had brought their presents and arrived, we all headed for the hundred-yen shop together. In order to buy poppers, paper, and other such party goods.

When you say hundred-yen shop, you think of party goods, when you say party goods, you think of the hundred-yen shop. This is common sense.

"... Hmmmm."

"Kagoshima-senpai. What are you worrying over so seriously?"

When I groaned in the store, a nearby Kurisu-chan looked into it.

"Yeah, just a bit. Hey, between the groucho glasses and the bald wig, which do you think will get a laugh?"

"... You're seriously worrying about that?"

"These are what bring life to a party. Look, it even says, 'Guaranteed Laughter!' right on the box."

"Don't seriously believe the maker's deceptive advertising."

"Hmmm. Which one are you going to put on?"

"I'm the one wearing it!?"

Kurisu-chan lost her pluck.

“I think these things are more fun when the least-likely person carries them out.”

“I don’t want to! Definitely not!”

“Hey, hey, don’t be like that. I’m sure it’ll look good on you.”

“It doesn’t make me happy to hear I’d look good in groucho glasses and a bald wig!”

“But you know, you’re cute, so I’m sure you’ll look good in anything.”

“Eh... n-no way... well, if you insist, then—no, it’s seriously not happening! Don’t look down on me too much!”

Gnn. So it didn’t work.

Failing to coerce my junior into my evil scheme, I returned to my stroll around the shop. For the time being, I put both the glasses and wig in my cart.

Even if we didn’t use them at the party, they were a hundred-yen a pop, so it didn’t really matter... my mind was warped by the hundred-yen shop magic.

“Oyyy, Kagoshima.”

When I was carefully inspecting the key role of a surprise party—the party poppers in the back of the store, Kagurai-senpai called over from around the entrance.

“Tadaa. I’m a glasses girl.”

“Oh my.”

Standing to the side of the revolving glass stand, Kagurai-senpai had equipped a pair of blue-framed glasses. She was slightly shifting both eyes to stare at me with upturned eyes.

“How about it? Does it excite you?”

“No, glasses don’t really do it for me... but you do look good in them.”

Those fake glasses with a sharp design fit her well with her slender chin. While there was a tag hanging from the corner of the frame, that was the charm of it. “I see, I see,” Kagurai-senpai happily smiled. “It looks like equipping glasses has drawn out my intellectual image even further.”

“.....”

Intellectual image... she says...?

Did I ever see Kagurai-senpai in that sort of... no, I did, long, long ago.

Before we were so close, I get the feeling I thought she was a cool, intellectual person.

I found myself reflecting on the time we first met. But... when I did, for some reason, the word 'fisting' came up, so I forcefully terminated that thought process.

It was a term with too great of an impact.

My memories were on the verge of being blotted out by it.

"But, well, having glasses mean intellectual is a bit cheap. Having bad eyesight has barely anything to do with intelligence."

"Now that you mention it, that's true. But, then, why do people wearing glasses look smart?"

"Isn't that because bad eyesight means they must hit the books a lot?"

"I see... but that's got to be a bit old-fashioned. These days, there are plenty of people who ruin their eyes with games and phone."

"Well, that's right."

"Nobita-kun wears glasses, but his grades aren't great."

"... Well, that's right."

Nodding with an ambiguous expression, Kagurai-senpai groaned in ponderance.

"Other than that, it's got to be from the large influence manga, anime and other fictional works have had."

"By which, you mean?"

"Intellectual characters are almost always wearing glasses, right?"

Yeah, I agreed. Those so-called smart characters did put them on from time to time.

"So don't you think the influence of fiction has established the image that glasses means smart?"

"Hmhmm... wait, huh?"

"What's wrong?"

"But Kagurai-senpai, the reason smart characters in fictional works wear glasses is because society had already established the image that glasses means smart, isn't it?"

Isn't it precisely because the viewers and readers were under the fixed notion

that glasses means intellectual, that the glasses archetype came to be?

“... Mm. C-certainly.”

A wrinkle graced Kagurai-senpai’s brow in thought.

Hmmm. It’s like the question of the chicken and the egg.

“When you get into it, it doesn’t look like there’s an end in sight... like the glasses they are.”

When I said that a little proudly, Kagurai-senpai tilted her head.

“Pardon? Kagoshima? What part of that was supposed to be the joke?”

“Eh... no, see, glasses, when you look at them closely, they’re like a sideways eight... meaning, they look like an ∞ symbol, don’t they? That’s why, I put together that ∞ shape, and the proposition there didn’t seem to be an end to it...”

“That’s hard to understand, and not particularly clever.”

She resolutely cut me down.

I thought I had said something wise, and on top of that, I desperately tried to explain it, so I kinda grew exceedingly embarrassed. Unable to stand it anymore, I quietly left and returned to the store’s depths. In the area where the tableware and ceramics were stored, I discovered Kikyouin-san with her gaze fixed on a single point.

“Kikyouin-san, is there something you want?”

I approached and tried asking.

“Mn. Ah, not really.”

She said, as she pointed out what she was looking at.

“Have a look at that.”

“Which one –!?”

The next instant, I shuddered.

“T-that’s...”

I gazed intently over the item Kikyouin-san pointed out.
To think I’d lay eyes on it in a place like this...?

"It's kinda nostalgic, isn't it? That pot."

"... Yeah."

At Kikyouin-san's level voice, I gave a powerless nod.

Lined up before my eyes, a shelf of the hundred thousand yen pot I had bought from Tsuchimikado-san.

"I did hear it was a hundred-yen pot. He must've bought it here..."

"Right. The one you got for a hundred thousand."

"....."

She didn't have to say it. Let me stand tall a bit, why don't you?
When they were gathered in droves like this, all I could see was cheap, mass-produced pottery. And yet, I ended up buying that pot at one thousand times its market value.

Even if I eventually got all the money back, I scorned the stupidity of my past self.

"... I think I'll buy one. How should I put it, as a cautionary piece."

"I don't see why not. But what about the one you already have?"

"Oh, that one was smashed up when I threw a ball full force around the house."

"... The hell are you doing?"

Kikyouin-san looked at me with the eyes of one observing a foreign lifeform, so I awkwardly averted my eyes. The pot was broken when I was playing with the dog Chris, but thinking about it calmly, I really had to wonder what the hell I was doing.

... Rather, if I reflected on my life to this point, as a whole, I get this feeling only the impression, "what the hell am I doing?" would come out...

I wonder what mood and momentum I've been living my life.

I'm getting to a good age, I should start looking out for myself. End quote.

BREAK

And like that, by the time I noticed it, we were buying various irrelevant things, but if we split the cost, it didn't amount to anything much.
As expected of the commoner's ally, the hundred-yen shop.

"Yeah. That was a fun trip."

With all the shopping over, as the four of us were walking through the first floor of the department store, Kagurai-senpai spoke to bring it all to a close. “Hmph,” Kikyouin-san cynically rung her nose. “Don’t they say, preparing for the party’s the easiest part?”

“In that case, we’ve got to work hard to make sure the real take’s even more fun.”

By the way, the birthday party location was my house.

The day after tomorrow, around five in the afternoon, the members apart from Orino-san would gather up and prepare, and when five came around, we’d call Orino-san. That was the plan.

Anticipation began to swell in my chest.

I can’t wait.

I wonder if Orino-san will like it.

And with those thoughts in my head, we made for the exit.

The automatic door opened, and someone stepped in.

“... Huh? Everyone...?”

The one who appeared right in front of us... was Orino-san.

Wearing a thin cardigan, with leggings under her skirt. I’ve noticed it lately, but I often see Orino-san wearing leggings or tights. Does she not like exposing skin, perhaps? She was wearing quite the daring outfit during the movie production though.

Orino-san fixed her gaze on us, blinking her eyes a few times.

“...!”

The four of us stopped right in our tracks. We hurriedly hid the various goods in our hands behind our backs.

Oh snap!

To think we’d meet Orino-san of all people at a time like this...!

“O-O-Orino-san! What are you doing here!?”

Silence wasn’t helping our predicament. For the time being, I tested the waters with conversation, but in my fluster, my voice came out unnaturally loud.

"I'm.. just here to buy some essentials..."

Orino-san said as she shifted her eyes. To me, then Kurisu-chan, Kikyouin-san, and Kagurai-senpai.

"... What are you all up to?"

"T-that's..."

I frantically worked my head.

If it got out that we were preparing for a surprise party, the surprise would be ruined. I had to somehow avoid the topic.

"Umm, the four of us got together to play today... and, we were doing some shopping at this department store."

"Umm... t-the four of you?"

"Yeah. The four of us."

"... Oh, I, I see... I, see..."

Orino-san lowered her eyes, she suddenly began acting restless. Touching her hair with her hand, she let her eyes loiter here and there, without any peace of mind.

"Umm... huh...? This looks like a gathering of the ComClub members, right? I don't... think I was invited..."

"Yeah. You weren't invited this time."

"... I-I see. A... haha..."

Orino-san leaked a dry smile. An unnatural smile she seemed to be forcefully making, and that expression of hers was surprisingly dark. Rather, her eyes were completely dead.

"... Ah, umm, I just remembered some business I have to attend to."

Her pitch rose as she declared. She turned right around on her heels, passed through the automatic doors, and raced off.

"Fuu. Doesn't look like she suspects anything."

I let out a relieved breath as I turned around. Three notably dubious faces entered my eyes.

"H-huh? What's wrong?"

“What’s wrong...? What do you think you’re doing?”

Kikyouin-san glared at me with gloomy eyes.

“Eh... I just thought I’d cover up the birthday party...”

“I get that, but I’m tellin’ you to choose your words. Take a deep breath, and try thinkin’ back over what you just told her.”

Hm.

Umm, in order to keep it a secret that we were hiding from her, and secretly preparing, I made it so that we were hiding from her and secretly playing. And since she wondered if she wasn’t invited, I confirmed she indeed was not.

.....

.....

“That almost makes it seem as if we’re shunning Orino-san!”

“That’s what I’m sayin’, you dense idiot.”

C-crap...

I grew too desperate trying to cover it up, my head didn’t get around to that.

“Do you think Orino-senpai will be alright? She was making a face like the world was over...”

Kurisu-chan said worriedly.

the regret within me gradually grew larger.

“A-anyways, I have to hurry and revoke that statement.”

I hurriedly moved to chase after Orino-san, but Kagurai-senpai grasped my shoulders to keep me in place.

“No, you don’t have to give chase, Kagoshima. You’ve actually done splendidly.”

“... What do you mean?”

“At present, I surmise that the shock from being the only one left out has dropped Orino down into the dumps. Her heart is being swallowed up by the darkness of despair. But what will happen two days from now, when she learns it was all in preparation for her birthday party?”

What will happen? Don’t ask me... umm.

"... Her joy will rise proportional to her sorrow...?"

"Precisely! This is precisely what it means to make the best of a bad situation."

"If I had to say, that sounds like more of a lucky punch..."

No, but is that really alright?

I can only hope all goes as well as she seems to think.

Rather, worst case scenario, when we call her up in two days' time, there's a possibility she might go "Even if you try to cover for it now, that doesn't change the fact I was left out..." and not even come.

It won't be a surprise if we reveal it before we call her, so we have to keep it a secret until she arrives at my house...

"... You're right. Now that it's come to this, let's go at it prioritizing the surprise."

After mulling over it, in the end, I reached my conclusion.

Chapter 2: Birthday Party

With this and that came August thirty first. The last day of summer vacation: Orino-san's birthday.

As promised, the members all gathered at three in the afternoon and began preparing for the party.

"Can I bring along Tamane-sama?" Kikyouin-san asked over the phone the other day. I had no reason to refuse, and in these sorts of celebrations, the more the merrier they say. With that said, "Of course you can," I answered.

Additionally from Kagurai-senpai, "Can I bring Gakuta?" She phoned in. I mean who cares, I thought, so "Of course you can," I answered.

Later, from Kurisu-chan, "Can I bring along my grandma?" or so a call—didn't come in. If it ever did, "Ah, umm..." I'm sure I'd give an exceedingly dubious answer. Even if it's the more the merrier, there should be a limit, or rather the atmosphere of the whole to consider.

And so.

The party preparations were carried out by Kagurai-senpai, Kikyouin-san, Kurisu-chan, Tamane-chan and I, the five of us. Gakuta-kun's a stuffed animal, so of course, he did nothing.

Well, even if I say preparations, there wasn't anything too grand to do; making some comparatively extravagant food, moderately decorating the room, and that was the end of it.

"That about does it. Yes, yes, when it was set up at such short notice, it's really starting to look the part."

I nodded a, "Right," to Kagurai-senpai's musings and looked over the living room.

The table was set with the stylish partyish foods prepared by Kurisu-chan and Kikyouin-san. They were lined up next to the fried chicken and drinks we bought at the shop, doing an adequate job at setting the scene.

The table cloth had been changed to a fancy one.

On the curtains, the words 'Happy Birthday Orino' were stuck on, a sheet of drawing paper per letter. Paper chains expended a large amount of time and

paper, so we couldn't make them. Those of for when you have an abundance of time, or in kindergarten and school events, where you have more hands than you have tasks to do.

"Now the problem is... whether Orino's coming or not."

Kikyouin said with a sigh, eliciting a reaction from Tama-chan.

"Mmn? What's this, isn't this supposed to be that Orino girl's birthday?"

"You're right about that, but... well, this and that happened."

Kikyouin-san struggled to find the words.

For argument's sake, we did get a text back from Orino-san that said, 'Coming,' but... reflecting on our exchange at the department store two days ago, I couldn't help but think of it in a negative direction.

... Seriously what do we do if she doesn't come?

The mood of the room sank. No matter how you looked at it, this wasn't the mood to hold a party.

"H-hey, people, psyche yourself up a bit! We can think of what to do if she doesn't come, when she doesn't—"

The moment Kagurai-senpai was on the verge of finishing, the houses' doorbell rung out.

She's here!

Everyone exchanged a glance. Our expressions slackened in relief. But at the same time, a number of index fingers stuck up before mouths. Calm down. Not yet. If you panic here, everything's ruined.

"Yeees! Who is it?"

I raised my voice from the living room to respond to the visitor.

"It's Orino..."

From the entranceway, I heard a voice just barely wrung out. It did seem she was still lingering on the other day, her voice audibly sullen.

Alright, I gripped my fist. Kagurai-senpai started distributing the poppers. Measuring out the time they would have reached everyone, I resumed my correspondence with Orino-san.

"Oh, welcome! Sorry, my hands are a bit full right now, so just come right in. Can you go to the living room? The door's unlocked."

"Y-yeah."

I heard the click of the front door unlatching.
We waited on standby, the poppers in hand, our attention concentrated on the living room door.
Gulp. I swallowed my spit, as a queer sense of session impregnated the room. Each time a footstep resounded from the hall, the tempo of my pulse would rise. Sweat oozed down the hand that held the explosive cone.
Concentrate, Kagoshima Akira.
Every element of the surprise hinges on this one single moment.
We'll all sound our poppers the moment Orino-san opens the door, we'll all give a chorus of blessings. And we'll divulge the fact that the matter the other day was actually in preparation for today.
The result: Orino-san's grand delight.
For this planned series of events, the first popper is more important than anything. If it comes out in scattered bursts, the impact will be halved. More importantly, if someone jumps the gun, it's over. In the million to one chance it goes off before Orino-san even enters, it'll be a grand sin worthy of seppuku.
I looked left and right, pleading through eye contact, "Everyone concentrate, concentrate."
I got back nods of, "You didn't have to tell me twice."
Looks like it was a needless worry.
Well, it's not like we're doing anything that's particularly difficult, and even if we don't pay it too much attention, it'll probably go fine.
And I hear poppers don't go off unless you pill them considerably hard, so it's rare you'll ever misfire one. I mean, it's fine with this much force.
I'm sure it'll be fine with a little more.
Huh? This is surprisingly durable.
Then wouldn't it be alright if I—

BREAK

BANG!

BREAK

“... ah.”

‘The hell are you doing!?’

Everyone’s voices overlapped in a yell. The line was the same all around. Even Kurisu-chan swore.

Whoah... I went and did it.

Why, when it really counts, why do I...

Everyone in the living room was quick to disparage me. Even Kurisu-chan offered a course insult. While their words all stabbed into my chest, among them, Gakuta-kun’s, “You bloody hair trigger!” hurt me most as a man. Urk... Gakuta-kun—meaning Kagurai-senpai just called me a bloody hair trigger... it might be just a little exciting, does that thought make me a masochist? Still, this really is bad. Since a large bang resounded through the hall, perhaps Orino-san was already under the impression that poppers meant party.

“T-that was... don’t tell me—”

Came a shaking voice. Ah, it’s all my fault the surprise is—

“— Gunfire!?”

..... Maybe not. No, but still, gunfire? What world do you have to live in for your thoughts to reach that point? Was Orino-san from some place where gunshots were closer than party poppers?

“K-Kagoshima-kun! Are you alright!?”

The living room door slammed open, as Orino burst in with an off-complexion.

“N-now!”

I hurriedly put out the order. Luckily, the others hadn’t yet unhanded their poppers. Having returned to their senses on my call, they directed their party implements at the day’s main guest, and pulled the strings all at once.

Babang!

A large sound boomed out as streamers of paper tape danced through the air.

“Ready, set,”

Kagurai-senpai said, and everyone continued on.

‘Happy birthday!’

As initially planned, we were able to say it cleanly together.

“.....”

Orino-san stood stock-still beside the door. It seemed she was unable to comprehend the situation, her eyes open wide, her mouth blankly hung open. Eventually, her thoughts caught up to reality.

“... Huh, oh, I-I see... come to think of it, today’s, my, birthday...”

She softly muttered.

“That’s right Orino. Today is your birthday. That’s why, as you can see, we tried holding a surprise birthday. How about it, you feel anything special?”

Kagurai-senpai grinned as she sauntered over to Orino-san.

“Come on. Let’s have a toast, cheers they say.”

Kurisu-chan began pouring out drinks.

With a kitchen knife in hand, “Hey, can I cut this cake into eight for now? Cuttin’ into sixths is hard.” Kikyouin-san said, causing Tamane-chan to show her displeasure.

“What’s that, Yuzuki. You plan to eat the sweets first? Should you not save that for the end?”

“But if we don’t take care of it fast, it’ll go bad...”

“Mm, is that how it works. How the times change...”

“No, wait a second!”

Intruding on the Kikyouin sisters’ conversation, I hurriedly stopped Kikyouin-san as she was about to calmly divide the cake.

“You can’t cut the cake yet. You’ve got to stab in as many candles as her age, sing the birthday song, and then have Orino-san blow them all out.”

“... Ah, right.”

“My, oh my. This is why birthday party amateurs are...”

“Guh... get off your high horse.”

Kikyouin-san vexingly grit her teeth.

There, Orino-san standing near the door fell right into a sit on the spot. Her bottom dropped in the gap between her feet, her legs folded beside her. Her

head hung like a puppet shoes strings had been severed. Because of that, it became impossible to make out her expression.

“Oh, what’s wrong, Orino? Let me guess, you’ve been moved to tears?”

Kagurai-senpai chided as she tried to peer into her face. To her, “Hey, you shouldn’t tease her,” Kurisu-chan tried to reprimand when—

“U, u, uuu...”

A voice similar to a sob leaked through the gaps in her hair. She slowly raised her face.

“... U, u, Uwaaaaan.”

She raised her voice in tears.

“Uwaaaaan. H-hic, U, uu, Uwaaaaaaaaan.”

Orino-san loudly bawled, still seated on the floor.

Caring not who saw her. Like a newly born child, she cried and wailed out loud. Large droplets of tears were dripping in chunks down her face.

“.....”

The rest of us had no option but to be dumbfounded. Even Kagurai-senpai who teased her was making an expression that spoke she had no idea what to do?

Do you think she’ll cry? I did consider, but I never thought it would reach this level.

“U-umm... O-Orino-san, are you alright?”

I approached and called out.

BREAK

[THERE IS SUPPOSED TO BE AN IMAGE OF ORINO CRYING HERE]

BREAK

“U-urp, I-I’m fine... hi, c...”

She didn’t seem very fine?

“... What happened? You suddenly...”

“I mean, I was so happy... truly happy that I...”

Her sob-mixed voice carried on.

“The other day, when I spotted everyone at the department store, I thought I was the only one being left out... it was a huge shock and... the whole time I was wondering if I did something wrong, if I made everyone hate me... so... so when I was called here today, I was sure it would be for something awful...”

“... Orino-san.”

“T-that’s why... I’m so relieved, and happy, now I don’t know what’s even happening... u, uuu, hic, uuu...”

It did seem that matter at the department store hurt Orino-san more than any of us had anticipated. More than half of it was pretty much my fault, so a sense of guilt was swelling in my chest.

Albeit, I was just the slightest bit happy as well.

It may be imprudent, but by with Orino-san misunderstanding she was left out of the group, hurt enough to cry—now that she knew that was all a lie, the way she cried tears of joy was kinda intolerably adorable.

For argument’s sake, the surprise party was a success.

Thought I get a feeling it was too much of a success.

“Now stand up, Orino-san.”

Said I.

“The party can’t start without the leading role.”

“... Yeah.”

I tried to produce a handkerchief from my pocket to hand to her, but unfortunately, I didn’t make a habit of carrying the symbol of a gentleman. I felt a sliver of regret as Orino-san wiped her tears with her personal handkerchief and stood.

“Here, Orino-senpai. Have a drink. Let’s start with the cheers, raise your glass.”

“You’re seventeen, aren’t you? Puttin’ up seventeen candles is surprisingly hard...”

Kurisu-chan prepared a drink, Kikyouin-san the cake.

Once the preparations were over, Kagurai-senpai began the rally for cheers.

“Ahem, well then, to Orino’s seventeenth year, and to our wonderful comrades—”

Everyone brandished the cup in their hand.

‘Cheers!’

BREAK

The birthday party continued around another four hours.
We ate cake, handed over presents, ate food, drank juice, talked, gamed.
We played.

Messed around.

Chatted.

Poked fun.

Teased.

Whatever the case, we had a fun time.

Everyone smiled.

We laughed, and laughed some more.

To a helpless extent—we laughed.

It was a merry time, like a dream.

And—

Precisely because it was as blessed as a dream, it greeted its end as all dreams must.

BREAK

“Kagoshima-kun, are you alright...?”

The night path had completely gone dark.

We were on the way back from some shopping at the nearest convenience store, when Orino-san beside me spoke in a worried voice. Her gaze was poured on the shopping bags hanging down from my hands.

“I really should hold some.”

“No, I’m perfectly fine. This much is nothing.”

Or so I put up a strong front, but honestly, it was a bit harsh. After buying a large quantity of drink bottles at the store, I tried acting cool and carried a large

majority, all was well to that point, but it did seem I had overestimated my physical strength a bit.

“But...”

“Let me look cool once in a while.”

“... I see. Yeah. Got it.”

Orino-san grinned. The ones who went out for the run were Orino-san and I, just the two of us.

As Orino-san was the lead role today, we normally shouldn't have been entrusted such routine work as shopping, but there was a deep reason behind all of this.

“Do you think they're alright...?”

Orino-san said.

“We just up and left them when they were so hammered, but... umm, I just hope your living room is in one piece.”

“One can dream...”

Right.

The reason us two were the ones shopping was because the other members were all drunk and downed. It all started when Tama-chan said, “This is what ya' need for a celebration,” and took out some expensive-looking Japanese sake. In the time I was busy wondering what the kid was saying, she had force a shot down Kikyouin-san.

What followed was debauchery.

Apparently the sort whose personality changes with some alcohol in her system, Kikyouin-san's talkative drunk state activated, the mood somehow became so that we felt obligated to drink, and by the time I noticed it, everyone had gulped.

What followed was hell.

How whould I put it, this and that went out of whack...

“It's the first time I've seen Kikyouin-san cut loose like that. She started doing one-liners as if it was only natural.”

“I'll rue this as the day I failed to record it.”

“I really panicked when Kurisu-chan started stripping. That kid really has to do

something about her exhibitionism... seriously, I'm worried for her future."

"Umm... yeah, I really don't think I can support her this time..."

"I'm surprised Kagurai-senpai was a crying drunk. Well, in the end, the reason she was crying was, what do I do about summer homework, but..."

"... All I can tell her is, do your best."

As the other members were smashed like that, me and Orino-san, who somehow got off unscathed, ended up going shopping.

"But, Orino-san. About these."

I held up the drinks we bought at the store.

"We got loads of Pocari, but now that I think about it, aren't you supposed to avoid sports drinks like Pocari when you're drunk? I've heard it makes you feel needlessly more intoxicated."

"Ah, that's just a common urban legend."

"Really?"

"Yeah. You won't feel too good if it's between drinks, or right after, but if you wait a little, and need something to rehydrate, a sports drink is the appropriate choice."

I see. Orino-san's as knowledgeable as ever.

"But still, Kagoshima-kun, you don't look too drunk."

She stared fixedly at my face.

"Don't tell me you drink regularly?"

"No, no. I just didn't take in much. Just a bit, and everything after that was juice. And even if I say that, I do feel a bit drunk."

My body was just a little hot, my head a bit hazy. Well, I was pretty much sober.

"Ah, but back there, it looked like Gakuta-kun was walking around on his own. Perhaps I'm actually quite smashed."

"... S-sounds like it! Yeah, I'm sure it looked like that because of the drink!"

Orino-san said especially loudly.

"Ad how about you? You don't look drunk at all."

“Oh, I’ve been trained from a young age, so alcohol and that sort of stuff is mostly ineffective and—”

“Huh?”

“Ah! No, umm... I-looks like I’m stronger than I thought! I’m surprised myself! Ahaha.”

I wonder what was with that professional-sounding line.

Could it be Orino-san’s eighth grade syndrome is activating? Personally speaking, Kurisu-chan’s already a handful.

“Ah, that’s right.”

I suddenly recalled and spoke up.

“Come to think of it, I haven’t properly apologized yet.”

“Apologize? About what?”

“About the department store. Because I arbitrarily played it off, I gave you a strange misunderstanding, didn’t I? I’m sorry.”

When I lightly lowered my head as we walked, Orino-san gently shook hers.

“It’s fine. I get it was all a misunderstanding.”

Her saying that was much appreciated on my side.

“But you never thought just a little, ‘everyone’s secretly planning my birthday’?”

It was two days before her birthday after all. Just pondering, ‘it might be for my birthday’ a bit couldn’t be called overly self-conscious.

If I was in the opposite position, I get the feeling I’d just normally think, ‘Ah, aren’t they preparing for a surprise?’

But, “... No, not at all.” Orino-san said. A slight smile graced her lips
It was a somewhat self-derisive smile.

“I’d completely forgotten today was supposed to be my birthday...”

There, Orino-san held her words as if hesitating. After one deep breath, she raised her face and directed her gaze to the night sky.

“The truth is, I don’t know my own birthday.”

“... Eh?”

Not understanding the meaning of her words, I reflexively turned towards her. She didn't know her birthday?

"... It's not today?"

"Yeah. August thirty first, you see, is a birthday I decided for myself. It's quite inconvenient if you don't decide it, so once upon a time, I randomly thought it up."

"..."

Why? I swallowed the word. I wasn't trying to be tactful. Before Orino-san's unnaturally bright smile, I simply ended up hesitating to step in any further.

"The reason I made it August thirty first was because I didn't really want it to be celebrated. I found it a little unpleasant for a fake birthday to be celebrated. If it was just before the end of summer vacation, everyone would have too much on their mind to celebrate it, right?"

"... Y-you mean."

"Ah, d-don't misunderstand. Today's birthday party's a separate story."

Orino-san hurriedly waved her hand that wasn't carrying a shopping bag.

"Today was really fun. It was really, really fun. Enough to cry out loud."

She gave a mischievous smile. I pat my chest in relief.

"I always thought it would only feel empty to have a fake birthday celebrated. I thought it would just remind me I didn't know when I was born..."

"....."

"But—I was wrong."

Her eyes directed at the night sky returned to me, she smiled sweetly. A very gentle smile.

"I was really happy. So happy I'm even finding it curious myself."

"Then that's good. Well... how should I put it. I think something rough like that's just right for a birthday."

"What do you mean?"

"No one knows for sure if their birthday's what it really is or not. For example, I know my own birthday, but that's just because I heard it from my parents. I can't declare there's no possibility I'm wrong."

From the start, a birthday's something arbitrary.

Within the predefined period of a year, it's simply the date a person marks as the day they were born. The precise time doesn't factor into calculation, it's a rough celebration done in day increments.

For example, between couples and close friends, one might celebrate with a text as soon as the date changes, but it's not as if they were born precisely at midnight.

That being the case.

criticizing it from that angle may come off as uncouth.

The point is, don't think too deep, it's whatever works.

Like the Japanese people who only pray to god when they're troubled, just do it whenever works. That's not what's important.

"Whether your birthday's real or not isn't important. What's important is that someone knows it. That someone will celebrate it. That someone else is thankful you were born into the world. That's what I think."

"....."

"Orino-san."

I stopped my feet and stood before Orino-san.

I faced her straight on.

"Happy birthday."

"... Thank you."

Orino-san lowered her face. I could hear the sound of a sniffle.

It seemed I'd made her cry again.

Umm, what do I do...?

My hands are sealed off, so I can't pull out a handkerchief, rather, I don't have one in the first place. Unable to think of any good ideas, for the time being, I turned forward and started to walk. I thought it best if I didn't watch her.

When I slowly walked without turning, Orino-san followed behind.

Quietly, the two of us walked down the dark path.

"... Hey, Kagoshima-kun."

A while later, Orino-san called out to my back.

"Are you happy I was born?"

“Of course I am.”

Still turned forward, I answered without a second’s hesitation.
Behind, I got the feeling Orino-san was smiling.
It was just the feeling I got.

BREAK

Upon our return, Orino-san and I did make an attempt to nurse the downed party, but in the end, everyone had fallen asleep on the spot. They were sound asleep.

If tomorrow was a holiday, that wouldn’t be a problem, but hang on, today just had to be the last day of summer vacation. We had the opening ceremony tomorrow. I tried my best to rouse everyone and return them to their own homes, but that was an impossible feat.

“Well then, Orino-san. It’s getting late, take care on your way.”
“Yeah. Thank you.”

The hour hand was passed ten. In the entranceway to the Kagoshima House, I saw Orino-san off. It’s no good to let a girl return home alone at this hour, but as she had before, Orino-san obstinately rejected my bodyguard application.

“I’ll drop by tomorrow morning. I want to help clean up and such.”

As a result of our discussion, we would wake everyone around five tomorrow, and return them all to their own homes, was the plan.

“Don’t worry about that. It’s your birthday party, so I’d feel bad if I made you clean up...”

“Nah. I’ll help. And we can’t have you sleeping in.”

When she said that much, I had no reason to refuse. I let myself be pampered by her words.

“Kagoshima-kun.”

Orino-san corrected her posture and looked straight at me.

“Thank you for today.”

“You should give those thanks to everyone. It’s not like I was doing it all on my own.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“Well ‘n, see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah. Bye-bye.”

Orino-san gave a small nod, before turning on her heels and walking off. Once she had walked a while, she turned towards me again, made a smile brimming with energy, and grandly waved her hands.

“See you tomorrow.”

A gentle smile.

A bright smile.

But—no, precisely because of it, my heart somewhat hurt.

BREAK

Perhaps by that time, she had already noticed.

Perhaps she already had a slight sense that this might be the end.,

In contrast to me who couldn’t notice anything—somewhere in her heart, perhaps she had already made her resolve.

The resolve to never meet us again.

The resolve to never return to this side again.

The resolve to know the meaning behind her birth.

The resolve to know the meaning behind her creation.

Chapter 3: The Reason She was Born

“Don’t forget, Akira-kun.”

Ten years ago.

In Gentle Breeze Park, seven-year-old me, in the middle of his training to protect the world as a hero of justice met a lady in a strange suit.

The lady who suddenly appeared spoke to me about all sorts of things.

About training, about family, about the future, about myself.

About heroes of justice.

I left my body the passion that came from my youth, and tried a lively proposal.

My rejection and tears that came as a result, come so far, it was now a good memory... no, just some black history, maybe.

Anyways.

That chance meeting—was something special to me.

“There are no heroes of justice in the world. If you ever see someone who looks the part, please don’t notice for them. Become a man of large caliber who can write off all abnormalities as your imagination.”

That was the curse the lady cast on me.

The reason I gave up on becoming a hero of justice.

While her face and figure were hazy, the many words I exchanged with her, in the deepest parts of my heart still remained like a lynchpin. What was that lady doing these days?

Was she living happily with that man she said she liked?

BREAK

The next day, I awoke to the morning light streaming in from the window. It had been several months since I last saw that old dream.

I was looking right at the lady’s face whenever I dreamed, but once I opened my eyes like this, I suddenly couldn’t remember it. All I could recall were her strange suit and huge breasts.

“... What terribly short-term memory if I do say so myself.”

Sluggishly, I raised my body and checked where I was. I was on my own bed. My consciousness gradually awakened.

After I saw Orino-san off yesterday, I didn't feel up to cleaning alone, and I was just a little bit sleepy thanks to the alcohol, so after draping blankets over the members asleep in the living room, I immediately fell asleep.

Hmm.

But it's not half bad, waking up to the morning light like this. I'm always waking to the electric sound of an alarm, so the natural feeling of awakening like this is quite comfortable—

“... Mn?”

Wait a second. As I recall, wasn't I supposed to take up at five today to get everyone else up... I do recall setting an alarm before I fell asleep, but the fact I'm waking to natural light means...

I timidly confirmed the time on the alarm clock and found myself speechless. The needles had reached six thirty.

“... O-oh god!”

I leaped off from the bed, and dressed myself on the super express. This is bad. When it comes to six thirty, that's the time I always wake up. Even if I got everyone up now, whether we'd make it for the opening ceremony or not is... what do I do? As it is the Computer Club members all played hooky on the exams, so our reputation at school isn't good...

When I practically tumbled down the stairs,

“Ah. Good morning. Kagoshima-senpai.”

There was Kurisu-chan. In her hand was the tableware we used at yesterday's party.

“M-morning... huh? You're already up...?”

“Yes. Orino-senpai came over.”

“Orino-san... I see.”

So in the end, I was saved by her.

As I was feeling pathetic, Kurisu-chan raised her head in recollection.

“I'm sorry about yesterday. I kinda fell asleep before I knew it...”

“I don’t mind that one, but... don’t tell me you don’t remember yesterday?”

“Umm, my memory sort of gets hazy along the way...”

“... I see. Yeah, it’s for the best.”

And with that Kurisu-chan headed for the kitchen to wash off the tableware. When I stepped into the living room, there were Kagurai-senpai, Kikyouin-san, and Tama-chan, the three of them. They were all working hard, wiping down the table, cleaning up the room decorations, and taking care of the party mess.

“Oh. Brat. Think you can just wake up all carefree at this hour?”

Noticing me, Gakuta-kun asserted himself in a thorny tone—meaning Kagurai-senpai said it.

“You’re late, Kagoshima. We’re pretty much done cleaning up.”

“So it seems.”

Nodding to Kagurai-senpai’s words, I looked over the living room. As if yesterday’s mad ruckus was a lie. It had returned to the usual Kagoshima house living room. It looked like everyone had done their best while I was asleep.

“... I’m sorry. Sleeping in on my own.”

“Don’t mind it. I should be apologizing for dozing off yesterday. Well, I don’t remember much after I took a drink.”

Looks like she doesn’t remember either. I tried asking Kikyouin-san nearby.

“Kikyouin-san, do you remember yesterday?”

“uh? Ah, no, I’m also, totally, a bit hazy...”

Looks like everyone’s the type that forgets when they’re drunk.

... Yeah. In that case, let’s just leave it be.

No need to go out of my way digging up dirt.

“We remember. Boy, yesterday was a masterpiece. To think Yuzuki would—
mffmfmm.”

As she nonchalantly tried to stimulate a landmine, Tama-chan’s mouth was hurriedly covered. Why is this kid even stronger with alcohol than her big sister? Is she really an elementary schooler?

“Hey, isn’t it about a good time? I’ve got to stop by home after this, so I’ve

gotta get goin'."

When Kikyouin-san said so, Kagurai-senpai nodded.

"You're right. Mnn, but there's a bit left to clean up..."

"I'll do the rest. I did oversleep after all, please let me do that much."

Ninety percent of it was already done, so I doubted the rest would be a problem for me alone. The others accepted my proposal, hurriedly preparing to return.

If they left now, well, I'm sure they'll just barely make it to the ceremony.

"... Huh? Come to think of it, where's Orino-san?"

"Went to take out the trash. She should be returnin' around now?"

After Kikyouin-san curtly answered my question, the entrance door opened with a click.

Is this one of those speak of the devil moments? It seemed Orino-san had returned.

"I'm back."

The living room door slid open, and she appeared.

Wearing the female uniform of Adatara High School, her glossy black hair swaying as she walked towards me.

"We cut it real close with the trash. I made it just as the garbage truck came."

As she said that with a bitter smile, Kagurai-senpai sent over some grateful words.

"Your services are appreciated, Orino. We're going to get going, but what about you?"

"I'm going to head to school from here. Unlike everyone else, I have my uniform, after all."

"... Eh? Then Orino-senpai, you plan on c-commuting with Kagoshima-senpai?"

Dropping by the living room after she'd finished washing up, Kurisu-chan opened her eyes in shock. With Kurisu-chan pointing that out, she frantically waved a hand.

"U-umm, well it looks like that's-coincidentally- how it turns out."

"Hmhmm. I see."

Kikyouin-san said in a mischievous voice.

"No wonder you stopped by so early in the morning. Helpin' out the cleanin' and wakin' us up was the excuse..."

"Kikyouin-san!? Y-you're wrong! I-I don't particularly..."

Bashfully intertwining her fingers, she turned down a reddened face. There, Kagurai-senpai approached with a vexed expression,

"Damn, to think to think she'd steal a march like this... aaah, we never should've tried a surprise party."

She said in a sulking tone.

"Orino-senpai, that's unfair! If that's how it's going to be, I'll... ah, but I don't have my uniform so... Mrr..."

"W-wait, what are you all talking about!? I really wasn't aiming for it! It was all just a coincidence, and as thanks for the party, at the very least, I wanted to help out the cleaning so..."

And she looked at me, pleading for help.

"Hey, Kagoshima-kun, you say something too."

She told me.

I—couldn't say a thing.

My head felt like it would burst in shock and confusion.

"... Kagoshima-kun? What's wrong?"

Her expression turned doubtful as she peered into my face.

"I don't even know where to start—"

I honestly voiced out the question on my mind.

BREAK

"What are you doing, Yomiga-san?"

BREAK

I said to her—Yomiga Eri-san.

An Orino-san-like face, Orino-san-like expression and gestures.
In an Orino-san-like voice, she even said the sort of things Orino-san might say.
She wore Orino-san's uniform, moving how Orino-san might.
Yomiga Eri pretended to be Orino-san as thoroughly as humanly possible.

"... Huh? Umm—"

Yomiga-san touched a hand to her chin, a troubled look on her face.
It was a very Orino-san-ish gesture.

"W-what are you saying, Kagoshima-kun..? Y-Yomiga-san? Who's that?"
"No, that would be you, right? What are you saying should be my line. Rather,
what happened to your hair? Did you dye it?"
"... Kagoshima-kun? Are you still half-asleep?"
"I'm fully awake. Ah, don't tell me, you swapped out with Orino-san to surprise
everyone? Ah, in that case, I'm sorry for noticing. I didn't even know you and
Orino-san were acquainted, see."

As we continued on an unmeshing conversation like that, the other members
reached one after the next.

"H-hey, Kagoshima... what are you talking about? This is Orino, right? No
matter how you look at her, its Orino."

Kagurai-senpai paranoiacally posed the question.

"Oh not at all. This girl is called Yomiga Eri-san, she's my childhood friend's
friend. Well, she looks really similar to Orino-san, and I can't blame you if you
get them mixed up."

"... You bein' serious? If it's a joke, I ain't laughin'."

Kikyouin-san glared at me. Her eyes shook in suspicious and anxiety.

"It's not about being similar, that's Orino, isn't it...! And wait, the presence I'm
sensin' belongs to Orino... right, Tamane-sama?"

She sought confirmation from Tama-chan beside her.

"Yeah, Yuzuki's right on that one. We just strained ourself to examine for real,
but there's no doubt this presence belongs to that girl called Orino."

Bringing about an air unthinkable of a little girl, Tama-chan stated definitively.

“Gakuta, how about it.”

Kagurai-senpai spoke out to Gakuta-kun in her pocket. In that instant, a mechanical light dwelled in the dolls eyes. Bzzt, clk, a strange electronic sound resounded.

“—— Scan Complete. Height, weight, retina, fingerprint voice print... identity matched with 99.999% confidence. The system doesn’t have a 100%, so it’s essentially the same thing. Everything from A to Z says Orino Shiori. Can’t be anyone else.”

“I see. That eliminates the possibility of a twin or doppelganger.”

“Kagoshima-senpai...”

Kagurai-senpai, Kikyouin-san, Kurisu-chan. The three of them looked at me with eyes fully exposing their skepticism. I couldn’t quite feel at home under those criticizing looks.

Huh? This is strange.

Why hasn’t anyone... noticed?

“H-hey, Yomiga-san. Hurry and tell them. They’re starting to think I’m speaking nonsense...”

I hurriedly sought out her lifeboat, but for some reason, she continued to act like Orino-san.

Thoroughly so.

Abnormally so.

Orino Shiori was... being impersonated.

“But you are the one who’s not making any sense, Kagoshima-kun. Seriously, how long are you going to run with that? I’m going to get angry soon.”

Yomiga-san’s expression turned sullen.

At this timing, in this situation, it was indeed the sort of expression Orino would make, and indeed the words she would say.

“No, no, Yomiga-san. I already figured it out, so let’s just pull back the curtains. You’ve already fooled them plenty. If you don’t do it now, the opportunity will slip by.”

“A-and I’m asking who this Yomiga-san is...?”

“And I’m saying Yomiga-san is you. Ah, whatever, where’s Orino-san? Is she

waiting to pop out somewhere? Orino-saaa! You can come out now!"

"O-Orino is me! Hey, Kagoshima-kun!"

It was a pleading voice. With a face about to cry, she strongly tugged at my arm...

But, I went on. It was simply an obvious fact.

"You're Yomiga-san. Not Orino-san."

"..."

And.

The next instant, Yomiga-san's expression vanished.

From her face, her whole body, all sorts of emotion chipped away. Only her slight moving lips indifferently emitted the words.

"It does seem—any further is futile."

The atmosphere surrounding her took a drastic change.

Like a coin that had been flipped over, a sudden inversion.

Expressionless.

Inorganic, emotionless, an expressionless face like a doll.

Truly a Yomiga-san-esque expression.

This was Yomiga Eri's true form after giving up on playing Orino Shiori.

"—Wha!?"

At the sudden confession, everyone apart from Yomiga-san and I stiffened up.

But without taking heed of anyone else, Yomiga-san spoke to me.

"You surprised me—Kagoshima Akira. I thought I had completely pulled off the act, but what part tipped you off?"

"What part, well—"

BREAK

[IMAGE]

BREAK

Sure enough, they were more similar than I could comprehend.

More similar than twins or doppelgangers.

More than similar, the word identical was accurate, and I do think their

existences overlapped in such a way that I'd accept it if I was told she was an Orino Shiori from another world.

“— I mean, you’re completely different.”

Said I. It was my honest impression.

“.....”

Yomiga-san remained silent a while, but eventually muttered in a quiet voice.

“He’s a man who doesn’t understand anything— but what’s truly important, that alone he understands.”

Those words were ones I had heard from Oshiri-chan a little while ago, Orino-san’s words.

Orino-san’s evaluation of me.

“So that’s how it is. In the end, that’s the sort of existence you are.”

“... Did you hear that from Orino-san? Or from Oshiri-chan?”

“I have perfectly traced her memory. No, I hold joint ownership, or perhaps they’ve been synchronized, phrasing it like that would be more accurate.”

“T-trace? Y-yeah. Tracing isn’t good. When manga artists and illustrators trace these days, I think it’s a serious problem.”

“Not just the memories. Her expression, gestures, tone... in every regard, I perfectly played Orino Shiori. Appearance goes without saying. From the start, this body was to accomplish this role...”

“Yeah. I think you really were just like her. Yomiga-san, I never expected it, but you’ve got the makings of a great actress.”

After repeating a conversation that had missed the mark at some point, the other members who’d been fixed as if frozen in time started moving.

Taking distance, stepping back from Yomiga-san, they gathered around me.

“State your identity!”

Kagurai-senpai shouted, her hostility on full display. But her profile exuded feelings of unease and fear. I hurriedly came in to help the girl out.

“K-Kagurai-senpai, how about we calm down a bit? I said it before, but this girl’s called Yomiga-san, and she’s an Orino-san lookalike—”

"Lookalike...? Quit with the jokes, whelp."

Tama-chan interrupted my words in a frighteningly low voice. It was rare for the kid who clad herself in an air like a youkai who'd lived for centuries, a somewhat frightened voice.

"... We know a number of techniques to impersonate another, but this is not something so cheap... it is like a nightmare. Even now, we cannot believe this lass is not Orino Shiori."

"—— Scan Complete. The result... no change. Hey now... this system even sees through clones... who the hell is this girl..."

"Who... are you!? What is your relation to Orino-senpai!?"

They were all glaring at Yomiga-san. As if looking upon some unknown monster, a combination of fear and wariness surfaced over their faces. The air in the room suddenly stiffened. Within a painful silence, as if it didn't bother her in the slightest, Yomiga-san calmly opened her mouth.

"I am not anyone. If I had to say—I am the 'Cage of Death Remnant's inferior copy. An imitation—at the same time, an existence bearing the role of her replacement."

Indifferently, she carried on in a cold tone.

"Upon the Cage of Death Remnant's absence from the world, I am to take her place, and live as Orino Shiori. For the world to keep turning with nothing amiss, I am to fulfill the life of Orino Shiori—that is my final role, and my greatest role....."

Yomiga-san cut her words there; she directed her glass ball-like eyes at me.

"So this is the 'ability to see through to the true nature of things' that master mentioned—Kagoshima Akira. It is your fault that the very reason for my existence has disappeared."

"Eh? You risked the very reason for your existence on swapping with Orino to surprise us? Well, umm... sorry for that. I didn't mean to."

"The reason I was born—is now ruined."

Yomiga-san said.

While it came in a level voice fitting of her, even so, the voice ran with a faint

hint of loneliness, so I kinda felt like my chest had been squeezed.

“... Kagoshima! Get over here!”

Right after, Kagurai-senpai pulled my arm and hid me behind herself. At the same time, Kikyouin-san and Tama-chan, Kurisu-chan stood before Yomiga-san. A formation had been set up with myself at the center. If I had to put it in shogi terms, I was at the king position, and everyone else had gathered as the encirclement.

Everyone had thought to protect me.

In the Kagoshima House morning living room.

With Yomiga-san still like a doll.

For some reason, everyone had entered battle mode.

And—there was me, not understanding the situation.

I wouldn’t call it a Mexican standoff, but whatever the case, a strange triangular relationship had been formed.

“U-umm... Yomiga-san.”

Unable to bear this stiff atmosphere, I asked.

Everything she’d been saying for a while now had been incomprehensible, and while I couldn’t understand why everyone else had to get so serious, that didn’t really matter. Even if it didn’t matter, it was a secondary issue. There shouldn’t be a problem with me letting it slide. But there was just one thing that bothered me to no end. Something I couldn’t let slide.

“Where is Orino-san?”

Said I. That was all I wanted to ask.

As long as I knew that, the rest really didn’t matter. Whether it was a surprise, or long lost twins, or clones, or doppelgangers, as long as Orino-san would come out, I could send it all off with a laugh.

Flipping it over.

If Orino-san wasn’t there—there was nothing for me to laugh about.

“Hey, Yomiga-san. Where is Orino-san? She’s hiding somewhere, isn’t she? If you give her a call, she’ll come out, won’t she?”

“.....”

“... Hey. Where’s Orino-san?”

“.....”

“Hey?”

“.....”

“No seriously. Just tell me, just say something.”

“.....”

“Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey... answer me.”

“.....”

Yomiga-san didn't say a thing.

Silently, she put a hand into her uniform pocket, took out a strangely shaped device, and touched it to her ear. Was it a cell phone? It was a model I'd never seen before.

“— Utsurohara Gouichirou. Change of plans. You may put off the organization's destruction to a later date. Please make your way here.”

Her heatless eyes were directed at me.

“Start by—getting rid of Kagoshima Akira.”

Getting rid of.

At the turbulent word, the atmosphere of the other members changed. A strong light burned in their eyes as they directed looks of hostility at her. But Yomiga-san continued her call with her unintonated voice.

“—Yes. You do not need to worry about being seen. Just in case, we have already cleared everyone out of the area. Of course, there might be a few unrelated people around, but it is nothing for you to worry about. No matter who you kill or what you break, we will take care of it on our end.”

And so, said Yomiga-san.

“Don't worry about cleaning up or keeping low—go mad to your heart's content.”

The moment those words had finished—truly in the very next moment. Right beside us as we confronted Yomiga-san.

A large window that covered an entire wall, giving an uninterrupted view of the Kagoshima House yard.

The window class let off a shattering sound as it cracked in its entirety.

There was no time to turn my head. With just a narrow glance to the side, the first thing that entered my eyes was the car's license plate.

A truck to be more exact.

A semi-truck.

What's more, the truck was, as they say, pimped out. So many decorations on the lights and bumpers there couldn't be any more, it was a design that asserted its own individuality quite vehemently.

That pimped out semi—suddenly crashed in from the window. As we faced forward, suddenly a new vector infiltrated perpendicularly.

There wasn't anyone in the driver's seat.

That took out the possibility of drunk driving or falling asleep at the wheel.

Rather, to start with, the truck wasn't riding along the ground. It floated around a meter above it, coming straight at us as if to pierce in diagonally down.

So rather than charging, maybe saying it was falling would be more accurate?

... Huh?

I just ended up giving an extremely lengthy description of a single instant, but is this what they call, you know, that? The revolving lantern thing?

When a human is cornered into a critical scenario, the processing speed of their brain accelerates to several tens the norm, and you're able to see the scenery in slow motion; this present situation is exactly that.

The glass fragments that continued to flutter through the air reflected the morning sunbeams. Colliding with each and every fragment, the semi slowly approached.

What should I call this?

Like being punched by Gold Experience's initial abilities? Or perhaps Szayelaporro Granz tasting the superhuman drug?

Anyways... everything was slow.

Naturally, my movements included.

I have to move, I thought, but it was almost as if my body wouldn't move for me.

The pimped out semi-truck, cruelly slowly ran us down.

BREAK

BREAK



BREAK

BREAK

“— Throwing a semi-truck with brute force, is it?”

In the space where the dust cloud rose, Yomiga Eri levelly spoke. Even gazing over the completely-destroyed scenery, her expression showed no change.

“As always, that Utsurohara Gouichirou’s methods have no elegance. Reckless, just brute forcing it. Perhaps I should have given some more precise instruction—that being the case, seeing how I didn’t take any damage at this distance, perhaps I could say that man did look out for me in his own way.”

After analyzing the damage her body incurred as someone else’s business, Yomiga looked over the surroundings.

The Kagoshima House Living Room no longer retained its original form. The walls, the pillars, the furniture, it had all been destroyed. Because the ceiling had collapsed, the bed and bookshelves on the second floor had fallen to the first.

The truck that caused the destruction’s gasoline ignited on impact, blowing it upright after it made its destructive way through the living room.

The blast wave dispersed flames, burning through the Kagoshima House—no, what had once belonged to the Kagoshima House with a fearsome momentum. The flames burned brilliantly, raising a deep black smoke. The miserable scene surrounding her spoke wonders of the destructive power a single bullet fired by a certain single psychic could inflict.

Albeit, the semi was far too massive, boasting far too fierce destructive power to call a bullet.

“There being no driver was— A coincidence, I surmise. There is no way that man would show such consideration to a civilian.”

Yomiga said as she fixed her eyes on a certain point. In the room where everything had become a complete mess, as if a hole had been opened right up, a circular space had been formed. It was the space the truck had passed through a few dozen seconds prior. Yet the damage it took was so little it could be called completely unscathed.

The flooring and carpet were just as they were, forget rubble, not a single fragment of glass had fallen there.

Seconds ago—it hadn't changed at all from before the truck collided.

".. Hmph."

Gradually as the dust settled, an arrogant laugh resounded.

"Whatever half-wit did this, they must be taking us for a fool. Did you think you could do anything to the fair-faced gold pelted nine-tailed fox—Tamamo no Mae's lone daughter with an attack of that level."

On the head of the young girl using words unbefitting her appearance, were fox ears. From her rear, nine gold, glimmering tails had sprouted, swaying languidly in the air.

The strongest demon fox in history—Tamamo no Mae.

The fox who strongly inherited her blood—Tamane.

The sealing collar the Kikyouin House imposed on her even now existed on her neck. But from the happening at the start of spring, the collar had lost its effect. Therefore, Tamane was at present able to make use of her own abilities without any limit.

Of course, if it came to light the collar had been destroyed, the Kikyouin House wouldn't stay silent.

For that sake, Tamane cooperated with Kikyouin Yuzuki, getting around to craftily, craftily use her abilities on occasion but—now, Tamane had released all the power of nine tails.

To defend against an attack far so sudden, she had no other choice.

"Yuzuki, are you hurt?"

"No, no problems to report."

At Tamane's call, Kikyouin Yuzuki answered.

Her form was no longer the casual-clothed one from a few dozen seconds ago. With a characteristic white and red coloring, the costume of an onmyouji. Her right-hand fingers clenched a single barrier charm.

What defended against the truck collision was Tamane's power. But the aftereffects—the wind, and the rubble had been blocked by Kikyouin Yuzuki's barrier.

By Kikyouin and Tamane's combination, a coordinated defense. It was possible precisely because the two had fought side by side, a maneuver that didn't even need words, let alone eye contact. Around the barrier, even now fire burned. But right after, the blazing fire all condensed on a single point.

To the hand of a single young girl—it was drawn in.

“《Fire Lord’s Garden》”

The girl's name was Kurisu Crimson Kuria. Creastia Crimson Cridende Christopher Kurisu. Much like Kikyouin, Kurisu's form was no longer clad in the casual clothes of a moment ago. Over the garments constructed through magic, she wore the white robe she inherited from her mother. In her hand was a staff around as tall as she was.

“—Recognize, seize, absorb...”

The gathered flames were converted into her own magical energy. At the same time, the surrounding inferno was extinguished in its entirety, the black smoke burying up the space disappearing along with it.

To protect her comrades from the flames, and to power up herself.

Kurisu's 《Fire Lord’s Garden》 was an offense and defense packed into one.

“Kagurai-senpai, is Kagoshima-senpai alright!?”

When she had finished affixing the incantation, Kurisu turned back and pleaded to Kagurai Monyumi.

“He’s fine! He’s lost consciousness, but it’s nothing serious!”

Kagurai-senpai was bent at the knees, cradling Kagoshima Akira up. Both Kurisu and Kikyouin made anxious faces at the phrase ‘lost consciousness’.

“L-lost consciousness... i-is he alright!?”

“... You’ve got to be kidding me. That was supposed to be a perfect defense, so why...”

“No, see...”

Kagurai looked extremely reluctant to say the rest.

“The moment the truck bashed in, he went and tripped on his own, hit his head on the floor, and knocked himself out...”

“....”

Weak!

Inadvertently thrown into the vanguard positions, Kikyouin, Tamane and Kurisu’s faces turned dubious at once.

“Gya hahah. Ya don’t have to look at him like that.”

Gakuta raised his voice from Kagurai’s pocket.

“For argument’s sake, it looks like the idiot was trying to protect you lot.”

The stuffed animal’s eyes were directed at the lone young boy, soundly asleep.

“The moment of impact, the brat tried to get between you lot and the truck. Tried to be a shield and all that... good grief. Even if he did that, you’d all just be blown away together.”

His words caused everyone there to make a tired face.

There was no way to put it other than meaningless efforts. Even if Kagoshima Akira managed to stick up his body for them, to be blunt, there was no merit. Rather, any out of place movements, and he would be a hindrance.

“Well, in the end, he panicked and took a tumble on his own, so he’s beyond help. Gyahahahah.”

Gakuta gave a grand laugh, and lured in, the female camp had some small laughs of their own.

They weren’t of scorn or ridicule.

Those were gentle wry smiles.

How like Kagoshima Akira, they had all thought.

He was a man who would always repeat actions misdirected or off the mark, but those numerous peculiar actions would always be for someone’s sake.

That’s why it was like him.

... Including knocking himself out shrewdly making it so he wasn’t troubling anyone.

“—It does look like he is uninjured.”

When the unaccented level voice resounded, the oh-so-slightly slackened air tensed up all at once.

Onmyouji, Kikyouin Yuzuki. Her partner, the great youkai Tamane.

Magician, Kurisu Crimson Kuria.

Cyber soldier, Kagurai Monyumi. Her brother, Kagurai Gakuta.

The five immediately returned to their battle-ready positions, their minds concentrated on Yomiga Eri. At the single girl who, no matter how they looked they could only see Orino Shiori.

“While Kagoshima Akira took just a little damage, that isn’t enough to call an injury. An appropriate defense to a sudden surprise attack—splendid.”

Words of praise spoken all too coldly. Her tone was far too indifferent, it could neither be taken as commendation or sarcasm. As a result of analyzing the situation, the opponent had taken adequate measures, so she merely pointed it out.

Such a business-like air drifted around Yomiga Eri’s praise.

“Hah. You’re creepier every time we look at you, woman.”

“... Her form’s Orino top to bottom, but that tone and personality... what do you call it, character? In that regard, she’s someone else entirely. I don’t know if you’re a replica or alternative or whatever, but could you give an explanation that’s just a tad easier to follow?”

Tamane and Kikyouin said belligerently as they took a step forward. Behind them, Kurisu, and even further back, Kagurai and Kagoshima waited. To protect the powerless Kagoshima, and Kagurai who couldn’t use her power in reality, this formation was only natural.

“If you’re not going to answer, no one’s forcing you.”

Holding Kagoshima tight, Kagurai voiced the words strongly.

“In that case—we’ll simply recognize you as an enemy.”

“.....”

Keeping her silence, Yomiga touched the phone to her ear again.

“Utsurohara Gouichirou—your disorderly surprise attack has ended in a failure. Kagoshima Akira still lives.”

The moment she heard the statement, Kagurai's expression turned grim. She reaffirmed the 'getting rid of Kagoshima' she heard right after the sudden attack was neither a joke nor a lie. And—at the same time, this was also the moment they had all recognized Yomiga Eri as an enemy.

A definite enemy they could by no means overlook.

While each member took on a posture with no opening to exploit, Yomiga meanwhile showed no action. She maintained a neutral upright stance. She made it look like she had no intent to attack on her own. Was she going to wait for this Utsurohara comrade of hers? In that case, should they initiate? It happened as their thoughts turned to such things. Right beside them—a woman in glasses suddenly appeared.

As if she had teleported, she suddenly materialized in the air.

At this sudden visitor, their eyes opened in surprise.

But seeing the near-future design of the suit the woman wore, they immediately noticed she was associated with Orino Shiori. That explained the movement they could only think of as supernatural powers.

"Kagoshima Akira... and, the rest are Orino's friends from school, eh."

The woman in glasses muttered, gazing over the group.

Her brow was stained in sweat, her breathing was shallow and short. Parts of her suit were damaged, with the gashes and traces of blows standing out. Her entire body hinted off traces of battle.

"The name's Kugayama and... ah, no, who I am doesn't matter. Anyways, we don't have time."

The woman in glasses—Kugayama said as her gaze turned to the unconscious Kagoshima.

"I'll get to the point. Hand over that man."

"Wah!?"

Came a rough voice to the sudden happening.

Holding up Kagoshima, Kagurai answered her.

"D-don't be stupid! You suddenly pop in, say that, and expect us to just hand him over!?"

"Don't be alarmed. For argument's sake, I'm on your side. I'm telling you to

hand him over for his safety.”

“.....”

“I’ve heard a bit about you people from Orino. Don’t know the specifics, but anyways, you’re those sorts of people, right?”

Kugayama looked over the group in turn.

Kurisu and Kikyouin in their outfits disconnected from reality, Tamane with her ears and tail, the autonomously driven Gakuta—gazing over the girls who clearly didn’t seem to be civilians,

“Very soon, the worst possible man will get here. I don’t really get it, but he’s after Kagoshima. Masaki’s desperately holding him back for now, but he won’t hold out long.”

She said as her sharp eyes glared at Yomiga.

“I was wondering why Utsurohara suddenly went on a rampage, but this time, getting rid of Kagoshima Akira...? Good grief, my head’s going to burst. The hell’s going through your head? Orino lookalike...”

“Kugayama Momoe—I could grasp over the phone Utsurohara was in combat with someone, but to think his opponent would be that Masaki Souhei. I heard the organization’s annihilation was almost over, but it looks like you’re still alive and well.”

Yomiga ignored her foe’s question, giving her own objective view.

Kugayama clicked her tongue, returning her eyes to Kagoshima once more.

“I’ve got a debt to him, for what it’s worth. Seeing him die’ll make it harder to sleep at night. Anyhow, just hand him over. I won’t do him ill.”

Kugayama reached a hand towards Kagoshima, urging them on with pressing eyes. Kagurai thought for a moment, but,

“... Got it, he’s yours.”

In the end, entrusted Kagoshima to her.

A situation where Kagoshima was the target, and Kugayama’s teleport ability. Layering the two facts and some consideration led to the decision the first course of action should be to evacuate Kagoshima from this spot. After lightly shouldering Kagoshima,

“... You guys better get going soon too.”

Kugayama said, and immediately vanished. The girls without saying, even Yomiga simply watched it happened. With her need to hold Kagoshima gone, Kagurai stood and faced Yomiga. In a cynical tone, she asked.

“Yomiga Eri, was it? You don’t have to chase Kagoshima?”

“If I try to give chase, you’ll stop me. Please do not ask something so obvious.”

Yomiga answered curtly. Kagoshima’s flight at the hands of an intruder should have been an unforeseen turnabout from her side as well, yet even so her expression didn’t change.

“—So what do we do?”

Standing at the forefront, Tamane with her eyes affixed forward called out to those behind her.

“Listen to the glasses woman and flee? Or torment this toll woman until she coughs up information? We don’t mind either way, but if we had to say, we’d prefer the later.”

Baring her developed canines, she made a ferocious smile. Her voice brimmed full with her belligerent nature, and her confidence as a great yokai.

“—Utsurohara. Can you hear me?”

After a while of silent thought, Yomiga took out the phone again.

“The situation has changed. There is no further need for you to come to the Kagoshima House. Kagoshima Akira has been taken off somewhere by Kugayama Momoe, who you let get away—no, I am not being cynical. I did not expect a perfect job from you to begin with.”

A mechanical tone, a doll expression.

While it wasn’t as blatant as Tamane, even so, everyone present directed a hostility similar to bloodlust at her. Regardless, her pace didn’t crumble. She marched to the beat of her own drum to such an extent it could be called unnatural.

Like a set alarm clock going off at the same time every morning—like she was simply there to fulfill her own role, she indifferently conducted business.

At such a defenseless bearing, Kagurai felt a hint of irritation. It was only inevitable. When they were attempting to face her, to confront her as an enemy, Yomiga didn't seem to feel like answering in kind. Perhaps it was a little different from considering them a waste of effort, but it came with the tired futility of arguing with a prerecorded message. Still—the next instant, that futility faded

"Utsurohara—please chase after Kagoshima Akira. The five here—Kagurai Monyumi. Kagurai Gakuta. Kikyouin Yuzuki. Tamane. Kurisu Crimson Kurise—I shall get rid of them."

It had finally come.
Yomiga Eri would finally confront them.

"—!?"

The air shifted in the blink of an eye.
The aura surrounding Yomiga Eri changed into something else entirely. Once unreliable and ambiguous, she could now be perceived more vividly. Her overwhelming sense of presence forcefully cause the girls to embrace fear. Even Tamane who had been making an arrogant smile only seconds before, let the last remnants of her leisure fade away.
Their expressions tightened, their minds concentrated to the utmost limit. These actions were far closer to an instinct than a reaction. Like the eager barks of a puppy confronted with a ravenous beast, they were an action that gave the impression of the fear of the weak.

"—..."

A tension that didn't give time to breathe ruled the area.
The five of them had experienced countless life or death battles. While the variety and battlefields differed, each member was an individual who had risked their life with no exaggeration.
Still—no, precisely because it was so.
The girls cowered at the 'something' before their eyes. The more confidence they built up surmounting many a battlefield, so too did their fear of the unknown grow stronger.
That being the case, more so, the fact they were capable of cowering there was

worthy of admiration. In the case a civilian was here—for example, a civilian like Kagoshima Akira, the pressure Yomiga Eri emitted alone might cause them to swoon

It was precisely because these girls had fought for the world that they were narrowly able to confront the ‘something’ before them.

Barely, they had the qualifications to confront her.

“I did not have any plans to move, but—no if I have lost the role of a replacement, I have no other course of action. I cannot leave such dirty work to my master.”

“... Master?”

Within that stinging atmosphere, Kagurai bit onto the word.

“You’re saying there’s someone issuing you orders...? Are they the ringleader? It’s all under their orders? Both impersonating Orino and getting rid of Kagoshima?”

Where every aspect of the situation was ambiguous, she could only forcefully link fragments of information to set up a rough hypothesis.

From Kagurai’s point of view, she planned to say it for something to grasp onto. Not through wishful thinking, but through hopeless thought.

In this circumstance that might make her abandon thought entirely, the result of her even so strong-willed thoughts was a supposition she never wished to reach.

Yet still, Kagurai’s words brought a definite change to Yomiga.

“—These are not master’s orders. It is my own voluntary action. If possible, I wouldn’t want my master to have to resort to violence. Getting down to the base issue, I do not want him to have to give me orders—even if it’s indirectly, I do not wish for him to dirty his hands.”

She said as she cast down her eyes.

“If he does that—he’ll be hurt again.”

The doll-like girl put out a human face.

“That man... is a kind person. He’s kinder than anyone.”

“.....”

Sudden as they came, Kagurai and the others failed to comprehend Yomiga's words.

But the feelings she oozed alone came across. Those shaking emotions served to somewhat mitigate the pressure locking their bodies in place.

Yet still,

"That's why—by my own hand, I'll bury you."

Right after, the faintly warping air compressed to its original—no, passed its original state.

Yomiga opened her eyes.

What were there were inorganic eyes of glass. Losing every last remnant of humanity, inhuman eyes they were.

Yomiga took a step forward.

She hadn't even blinked when the long-haul truck collided, and now for the first time, she showed definitive movement.

The action—heightened Kagurai's vigilance and concentration to the very limit.

Not knowing the enemy she fought, of the reason.

Even so, her fundamental fear as a living being urged her on.

Her instincts cried out.

To escape from this 'something,' there was no choice but to put up a frantic resistance.

Without that resistance— death.

BREAK

Kikyouin Yuzuki moved.

"RinByouTouShaKaiJinRetsuZaiZen!"

Biting her own thumb, she composed a blood spell on charm she produced from her bosom.

In red characters, she wrote out the ceremony of possession. A curse to let an unhuman entity possess her own flesh.

The one Kikyouin attempted to summon in her—the partner she could trust more than anyone, Tamane.

The fair-faced, gold pelted nine-tailed fox's lone daughter.

Having inherited powers rivaling a god, the lone nine-tailed fox of the modern

era.

Once the blood letters composed on the charm let off a dubious light, Tamane's form began to vanish as if melting away into Kikyouin's body.

"Uu, ggAAAAH!"

Right after, her mouth raised a scream. As if man and beast had been added and divided by two, a scream that wasn't so gentle on the ears.

Fox ears sprouted from her gold hair, the hue as if the color had drained out, as tails clad in a divine light grew from her rear.

Gradually, the number of tails increased.

One, two, three, four.

Each time, Kikyouin's body would squirm, as she raised a voice that was neither a war cry or scream.

'Oy, Yuzuki, are you alright!?'

From inside her head, the soul of the assimilated Tamane cried out.

'As we thought, this curse really is pushing it! Don't increase the tails any further.'

The yokai power so vast it might leap from her body at any moment, desperately she contained it with her own spiritual energy as she thought.
(That's... no good. If I don't give it my all, I'll never defeat this one...)

Four. Five. Six. Seven.

'You fool! Planning to throw your life away!?'

(... Haha. No way in 'ell. So please lend me all you've got. Tamane-sama. If it's the two of us, just maybe we'll survive this.)

Eight.

And nine.

"Kikyouin style forbidden art..."

The fox-like ears moved, the fox-like tails quivered, Kikyouin spoke.

"The ritual of man and fox."

This spell was birthed by the Kikyouin house in an attempt to control the fair-faced gold pelted nine tailed fox. Of course, there wasn't a single precedent of it

succeeding, as all who tried the ritual were killed by Tamane's mother without exception.

At that very moment, Kikyouin Yuzuki succeeded in a forbidden ritual no one in the past had ever accomplished. While her talents were a contributing factor, the largest reason was Tamane's power.

It was precisely because Tamane was asserting her all to control the power from the inside that Kikyouin could stand without losing her ego.

It was a success only for Kikyouin Yuzuki, who had reconciled with the fox. However, even so, to Kikyouin's body, that far-too-vast youkai power was nothing but a poison.

(It's fine... if I manage to expel all this power that'll overflow at any minute.)

Exhaling through the gaps in her sharp fangs, Kikyouin cried out.

Several hundred years ago—

Tamamo no Mae was blessed by the god of lightning—the Heavenly Lord of Universal Transformation Whose Voice of Thunder Resonates from the Origin of the Nine Heavens with the lightning of destruction.

This lightning far too powerful was hard to control even with Tamane's power, and it was impossible to limit its scope. Just activating it once would turn an entire town to ash.

But in this state—in this state combining human and yokai, it was just barely possible to control the lightning.

It was possible to concentrate that geography-changing heavenly retribution on a single point.

“《Nine Thunder Play》!”

BREAK

Kagurai Monyumi moved.

“Dive In Realworld Code KAGURAI Boost Access.”

The combat of Kagurai Monyumi had all taken place within the B3 World. Due to that, when compared to the other three girls, her combat prowess clearly fell short.

While she was trained in martial arts to an extent, even so, in the real world she was close to powerless.

Regardless of the fearsome power she held in the B3 World, it as close to

meaningless in this one.

That's why,

(The image. Treasure the image.)

She—attempted to completely grasp this world.

The B3 World was an electronic virtual space. People of the future like Kagurai would inject their consciousness into it to operate within that space.

Meaning, it was like infiltrating a different world with one's soul.

In that case.

If she were to inject her soul from this world into this world—

“Oy, Monyumi.”

Her brother spoke up from inside her pocket.

“... Whatever happens ain't on me.”

“Don't talk to me, you'll throw off my calculations... you start concentrating already.”

“Good grief... in theory, you should be able to manifest it in this world for 0.27 seconds. Just in theory, mind you!”

Kagurai repeated calculations. There was no time to check over them. Even putting together her and Gakuta's brain, she would have to calculate every aspect of a world that changed with each passing instant, no matter how much time she had, it would never be enough.

(Make the boundary between the B3 World and reality as fuzzy as possible...)

What she was to do now, if one had to say, was an underhanded trick.

Like fooling a computer.

The principle was identical to an out-of-body experience.

Her own existence—she would input it into this world as a numerical equation.

Fool the world, and make ambiguous the rules under limited circumstance.

(Everything in this world is a probability. If you can calculate it in its entirety, then probabilistically, I can materialize in this world...!)

“HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH”

With a flop, her body collapsed.

Kagurai Monyumi's body, without any defensive reflexes, collapsed on the ground.

An instant faster than that, a translucent something leapt from that body.

“... It worked!”

Her transparent, unstable existence called out. Its form was identical to the one she usually took on during combat in the B3 World.

“No time! We’re settling this at once.”

“I know!”

The existence answered to the twitching bear ears. The diamond-shaped wings growing from her back spread out like a peacock, to show that existence off to the world.

“Lill Swordia—Mode Change—Category Zero.”

The blue sword she held in her right hand underwent a mechanical change, transfiguring into countless blades.

A transformation as if it had preserved conservation of mass in reverse. The unthinkable countless swords born of a single blade filled the space.

A memento of Kagurai Gakuta, Lill Swordia.

There wasn’t another in the world, the one and only sword of its type. A blade inputted with the data of weapons from all times and all places, it was programmed to be able to change shape into any possible weapon.

What she was about to do was a technique that drew out Lill Swordia’s weapon manifestation ability to its absolute maximum.

The strongest secret move worked out by Kagurai Gakuta.

“《Sword of Sin》!”

BREAK

Creastia moved.

“—Darkness deep beyond end, gently envelop the merciless light—”

Her words were incomprehensible to anyone there besides Kurisu. Because her chant, the words of the world Kurisu had lived—the planet Welnoss, the east coast of the Claure Continent, the country of Lughstoria—they were not.

Even if a resident of Lughstoria were here, unless they were a master magician,

they would quite likely not be able to understand her words.

The spell in its entirety was spoken in ancient tongue.

In the Claure Continent, far before the humans were born, it was the language used by the dragons.

A spell incantation in ancient tongue was far quicker than a normal chant, and the output of the magics born from it would shoot up.

“—Darkness and light. Day and night. God and the devil. Oh, let it all return to the chaos of origin—”

But as ancient language incantations were more deeply, more closely tied to the planet, the burden on the practitioner was disproportionately greater than a normal spell in a language made for man.

This was an obsolete technique no one of the modern era wanted to use.

Not to mention.

The technique Kurisu was using now was in itself a spell called a forbidden curse, and if she were to layer an ancient tongue incantation on top of that—it was a foolish act one could only see as suicide.

Reciting the incantation, Kurisu instructed herself.

(It'll be fine. When I used it against Griel-kun the other day, the aftereffects were lighter than expected. So even if I pair it with ancient language, I'm sure...)

The spell she was about to chant was a spell that served as her mother's trump card. She had acquired it not too long ago and lost her magic for a week as compensation.

However, that spell was one Allua, sung of as the 'Flower Beyond Reach' had only ever used enough times to count on a hand. It went without saying, she never once paired it with an ancient incantation. Allua never even thought to test her.

This trump card was what had brought her victory against the Devil's Child, Griestark D'Ifa Licuio Soel, but naturally, she hadn't tried ancient tongue then. Because a normal incantation would suffice. Its normal output concealed enough damaging potential to push back the Devil's child.

“—Further, further, further still—”

In Kurisu's body, the planet's power—mana converged. It was a common sight whenever she used magic, but today was clearly different from usual.

An abnormal amount of mana gathered at her. It was such a power that even Kurisu herself who had activated the spell felt fear.

Still—she wouldn't stop it.

(... Mama, papa, grandma...)

As if to pray, she mouthed the final verse.

“《Chaos Inferno》!”

BREAK

“—I see.”

Three different attacks, each with all their user's might. With there unexaggeratedly life-risking hidden techniques before her eyes, Yomiga Eri showed no change.

Indifferently.

Indifferently to the end, she answered.

“Splendid attacks. In regards to an unknown enemy, hammering them down with all your might from the first move isn't a bad hand to play.”

Like that, she continued to objectively evaluate her enemy.

As always, she maintained her expressionlessness, but she wasn't particularly making a poker face. Neither was she concealing her emotions. Her emotions were by no means difficult to exhibit.

The result of her honestly displaying whatever emotion was born in her heart simply turned out as a doll-like expressionless. Never once had she ever attempted to maintain her own lack of expression. Therefore, in the rare chance her heart was moved, she would all too easily leak her emotions. For example, the words World of Death and Cage of Death Remnant would bring large ripples to her heart. But anything else, like hitting at a frozen lake, wouldn't cause anything to sway.

To put things simply—it took a lot to stir her heart.

But that was all there was to it.

And right now, Yomiga Eri was expressionless.

Meaning, the moment three top-class attacks were directed at her—this was not one of those ‘a lot’s. Yomiga quietly held out her hand.

Without a hint of panic, an elegant motion.

With lips very reminiscent of Orino Shiori, she spun out her words.

“《Book Marker》”

Chapter 4: Underdog

When I woke up, I was in some factory-ish place. I could only describe it as ambiguously as factory-ish; that place had no wall, and here and there, the walls had been destroyed. Around the area, dusty machinery and mechanisms were disorderly stationed. Laying down on a cardboard box, I slowly raised my torso. The back of my head stung. When I tried touching it, there was a small bump. It did hurt a bit, but it wasn't anything I couldn't endure.

"You up?"

A voice flowed in from the side. When I turned, I found Kirako-san there. She sat on a rusted pipe chair, gazing over me. Her clothes were the suit she wore as a costume for the movie.

"K-Kirako-san!? W-why is Kirako-san here!?"

"... Ah, I see. So I'm still Kirako in your thick head."

For some reason, Kirako-san spat out the sort of breath as if she was worn out from the depths of her heart.

I took another look around. As I did that, I immediately understood where this was.

This was the factory in the mountains Orino-san's movie club had once used for filming.

It was used for an explosion scene, an abandoned car factory.

A few months ago, when I was searching for Orino-san to return the card she dropped, I ran right into Orino-san and Kirako-san filming a movie scene here.

"... That's right! Where are the others!? What happened with the truck!?"

Bit by bit, the memories from right before I was knocked out recovered.

"Your friends were all unhurt, last I saw them."

Kirako-san said.

"Really?"

"Yeah."

I pat my chest in relief. That's good. Everyone's alright.

"B-but why am I here with you then...?"

"I don't mind answering that question... but first, you speak on as far as you understand the circumstances. After hearing that, I'll use it as a criterion to decide the information I should tell you."

With her sharp eyes glaring at me, she one-sidedly barked an order.

"You say circumstances but... I don't have any idea what's going on."

"I know. Even so, tell me whatever you can about what you experienced today in detail. We're in the same boat, not knowing what the hell's going on. I want as much information as possible."

I tried processing the information again. But no matter how I tried processing it, I couldn't find any consistency, so I had no choice but to say exactly what I had experienced.

Like Jean Pierre Polnareff, I would say it just as it was.

"I... I shall say it just as it is—"

A vein stood up on Kirako's forehead.

... It seemed it wasn't the right air to mess around, so I decided to speak normally.

"Umm... today morning, an Orino-san lookalike called Yomiga-san came to my house, for some reason pretending to be Orino-san. I immediately noticed, but she obstinately refused to accept it... when I thought she'd finally given in, next she made a call to someone—as I recall... some person called Utsurohara, and then a truck suddenly crashed in."

That's where my memories ended. I get the feeling I thought, everyone's in danger, and moved all of a sudden, but I don't remember anything beyond that.

"....."

After listening to what I had to say, Kirako-san folded her arms, closed her eyes, and submerged herself in thought. I did want to assist her to the best of my abilities, so I decided to unveil my deductions as well.

"My conjecture is that Yomiga-san and Orino-san were actually close friends.

The two of them were presumably working together to pull a fast one on us. That plan failed when I ended up noticing. I'm sure that's what got Yomiga-san's mood down in the dumps."

"....."

"The truck crashing in... I presume it was a phenomenon caused by a tornado. No doubt about it. There was a tornado report on the news not too long ago. I might not look it, but I do keep up to date with the news you know. They're terrifying when you actually see them up close and personal, those tornados. They don't call them dust devils for nothing, those things are the devil's work."

"... Dude, just shut up."

Hearing a voice irritated to the very limit, I hurriedly held my tongue. It did seem my deductions were nothing but a hindrance to Kirako-san. How unfortunate, how embarrassing.

After a while of silent thought,

"... Good grief. No particularly beneficial information."

Kirako-san said.

"Wasn't expecting much from you to start with, so not that I mind."

"Then Kirako-san. Please answer my questions too. Why are you here?"

And I added on another.

Before I lost consciousness, it was the greatest thing plaguing my mind.

"Where's Orino-san?"

"....."

Kirako-san furrowed her brow, making an uncomfortable expression. After staying her words awhile, eventually, she slowly leaked her words.

"Today morning, maybe yesterday night... whatever, let's say early dawn, we received an attack. The Facility's Japan Branch's pretty much been annihilated."

"Organization, facility... attack? Eh? Was there a burglar or something?"

"Burglar? Haha, You can't imagine how much more peachy that would be."

She said in an especially cheery voice.

"The researchers and the ability holders... the few hundred people of the facility, within the span of a few hours were eliminated by just two people.

There were loads of battle type espers like me around, but we never stood a chance..."

One of those two was Utsurohara Gouichirou.
Standing at the summit of the sole three Rank Ses.
A psychokinetic special. The strongest psychokinesist.
If in pure combat ability, no one could even trail behind him.

"... Always knew he was strong, never thought he was this strong. A majority of the annihilation was done by that man. That f*cker... looks like up to this very moment, he never even used the t of his true strength. The remaining two Rank Ses went at him together, but they were done in like scrap paper. I did think he was a crazy bastard, but I never imagined he'd betray us so thoroughly."

And the other—she said, was a girl identical to Orino-san.

"Presumably that Yomiga you mentioned."

I wouldn't doubt it.

For a girl identical to Orino-san, there was only Yomiga-san.

"That one—didn't do anything. She appeared with Utsurohara, and after watching the annihilation a while, she disappeared somewhere. Don't know her goal, but it looks like she went prancing to your house pretending to be Orino."

"....."

"I don't know where Orino is. She didn't get back yesterday."

"... Umm."

Unable to bear it anymore, I went and said it.

"Are you talking about a movie?"

"....."

After staring fixatedly at me, hah, Kirako-san breathed a deep sigh.

"Yeah, whatever, let's go with that."

She stood from her pipe chair, and cricked her neck left and right.

"I'm gonna get going. You stay here."

"Eh? Going? Where to? Rather, if I stay here..."

"Just do it. Don't go home. Over there—"

She said, pointing out a machine in the back of the abandoned factory.

“—if you turn the meter with the black needle three times, a door to an underground room will open. Masaki was using it a while back. I hear there’s canned food and drinkable water, just live there for the time being. Don’t go out for at least a week.”

“A-a week!?”

I hurriedly protested such an unfair order.

“Please wait, why do I...”

“Did you get that?”

With her sharp eyes gleaning, I was forced into silence. She glared at me with such scary eyes, yet her expression was hopelessly serious. Such sincerity before my eyes, I could only nod a stiff nod.

“... Understood.”

“Good. If some miracle happens and everything ends before you know it, I might be here to get you tomorrow.”

She left me behind and walked off.

Along the way, “Ah, that’s right,” she turned, perhaps remembering something.

“This is as good a chance as any, let me tell you something.”

“What is it?”

“My name isn’t some lame-ass joke like Hoshizora Kirako.”

I tilted my head.

Huh? I mean, that’s what Orino-san said it was.

“Listen here. I’ll only say it once, so you’d better get it in your ear.”

She smiled a bitter smile, and introducer herself to me for the first time.

“The name’s Ku—”

Kirako-san disappeared.

“Eh?”

At the same time came a large sound to my flank. The sound of something colliding.

When I reflexively turned, I saw Kirako-san pinned on the concrete wall. Her back must have crashed in at a fearsome rate, as large cracks were spreading across the surface.

The real shocker was that her body was floating. No matter how I waited, she wouldn't fall to the ground. It was like some invisible power was grinding against her to keep her suppressed.

Her form made me imagine Christ condemned to the cross.

"K-Kirako-san!"

"—Gahah!"

Pressed around three meters above the ground, her mouth leaked a voice of anguish. I could hear the creaking sound of grating concrete. The stronger that sound became, the greater her expression warped.

"Kirako-san! Are you alright!?"

"... Dumbass. I told you, I ain't... Kirako."

After a barely-audible mutter, her gaze shifted from me just a little to the side.

"... Utsurohara Gouichirou."

I naturally followed her eye line.

There, in the pipe chair Kirako had been sitting in before, before I knew it, a single young boy was seated.

"W-whoa!"

I was so surprised I fell onto my bottom.

Startled as I was, I took another look at the boy.

Utsurohara Gouichirou, Kirako-san had called him. Meaning the one Yomiga-san was talking over the phone with was this man.

His age was a little over mine. Perhaps I was better off calling him a man than a boy. A flimsy slim build, he folded his legs as he sat on the rusted pipes. While he seemed to be taller than me, he looked to be far lighter.

His was a slender build completely unbefitting a name like Gouichirou.

A light shirt and ripped jeans. A paisley-print bandana was wrapped a round around his head. As a whole, he sported a rough, casual fashion.

"Aha."

Utsurohara-san turned his in my direction. His eerie reptile-like eyes gazed over me.

He opened his mouth wide.

"Ahahahah hahahah ha ha ha hahahah ha hahahahah."

He laughed.

"Ahahah. Ahh, now ain't that strange. Kirako, he says, bloody Kirako. Ahahah. I like you, you've got a good sense. It's been a whole day since someone got me laughing like this. Thanks for entertaining me."

His long and slender build swaying, he laughed a terribly merry laugh. And once more, he turned towards Kirako-san, speaking in a tone belittling her from the depths of his heart.

"You've got my pity, Kugaya. The hell'd you do to earn that lame-ass name?"

"... Utsurohara, bastard... what happened to Masaki...?"

"Masaki? Ahh, no clue. Probably dead, I'd say. I can't really be bothered to check that sorta thing. More importantly, how 'bout you tell me that lame name's origin?"

"....."

"Huh? Ignoring me? You're ruining my mood here."

A power sprung into his reptilian eyes. Right after, the concrete Kirako-san was pinned to began creaking harder all at once.

"Guh aaaaaaaaaah!"

"Kirako-san!"

[IMAGE]

"Ahahahahah! Cut me some slack, dude! You're really hitting my funny bone with that Kirako."

Kirako-san raised a bitter cry, I was losing my mind, Utsurohara laughed. I couldn't swallow down this situation.

Still, intuitively, I could tell the one tormenting Kirako-san was this Utsurohara-san.

I could instinctually tell this man wasn't sane.

"Ahahah! Ahh, You're killing me man, I almost cancelled out my power there. So I know I've got to focus but... It's still hilarious. Ahahah!"

Utsurohara-san guffawed aloud as he gazed at Kirako-san writhing in pain. I was growing excessively irritated at him. While I do think I boast a relatively peaceful nature, this time was one I couldn't forgive. That's why I closed in on him.

"... Don't make fun of someone's name!"

I screamed.

"... Hah?"

Utsurohara's smile vanished as he stared blankly at me. But my anger was far from quelling!

"What's so bad about Kirako? It's a great name! A splendid, wonderful name! Yeah, it's got so much hope put into it, it actually starts sounding desperate But that doesn't mean it's something to laugh at!"

"....."

"A name, see, it's something the parent puts their all into thinking up for their child's sake. I'll admit there have been a lot of strange names lately. Perhaps there are more parents who go off on a whim without thinking of their child's feelings. But that doesn't mean it's alright to laugh at them! No matter the name, that's a name a parent put all their love and thought into for the sake of their child!"

"....."

"So apologize to Kirako-san! Apologize for laughing at Kirako-san's name!"

"....."

From beginning to end, Utsurohara-san stared blanking, but I said what I had to, so my anger died down considerably. I turned to the concrete wall, and soothed her in a gentle voice.

"It's alright, Kirako-san. Nothing to worry about. I really like the name Hoshizora Kirako."

In regards to my follow-up with a refreshing smile, Kirako-san was moved to tears—or not, she glared at me with a fearsome angry look.

It was an expression as if her mental stress had outdone her physical agony.
H-huh? Isn't she kinda angry?

What's more, not at Utsurohara-san but at me?

"... You're the one who'd better get apologizing..."

It looks like my encouragement was off the mark. It was rare for me to speak so heatedly, so I felt a little embarrassed. Looking to be at her wit's end, Kirako-san breathed a deep breath.

"... God dammit. Each and every one of you—"

Those words,

"—Pissing me off."

From partway, I heard them from a completely different direction.
When she was supposed to be crucified to the factorywall, Kirako-san suddenly vanished. Only the human-shaped impression remained on the concrete.
The direction of her voice—I turned to the side and saw her standing right behind Utsurohara-san sitting in the chair. Her pose had her fist held at the ready.

It was almost as if she had moved through teleportation.

Without the slightest hesitation, Kirako-san lowered her fist with all her body weight behind it.

"Whoah there."

Utsurohara-san somersaulted forward to evade the attack as the pipe chair he was sitting in bent out of shape from the blow.

"Not good, not good, I blanked out so hard I weakened the power."

After dodging the attack with nimble movements, he stood and faced Kirako-san.

"Come to think of it, you were a general, were you? I let my guard down there."

"Keep it down to the grave, idiot."

Kirako-san held up her right hand. And there, a giant orb of fire manifested. Pyrokinesis.

The power of spontaneous combustion.

I recalled the scene of the film's shooting I had seen once before.

That scene I found it hard to believe came from a movie.

A psychic battle between Masaki-san and Orino-san.

"Uraah!"

To throw that ball of flames, Kirako-san wound up her arm.

However,

"Ahah."

Utsurohara-san gave an amused smile as he snapped his finger.

That instant—the flames turned to smoke and disappeared.

It literally lifted like the mist.

"—!?"

Kirako-san's expression was slathered over in shock. Utsorohara-san laughed aloud.

"Bastard... what did you..."

"Ahahah! It's simple. It's time for a fun science lesson. Did you know? A fire can't burn without oxygen you know? Even if it's a flame produced through pyrokinesis."

"Don't tell me..."

In regards to Utsurohara-san, whose triumphant tone made clear he was completely making light of her, Kirako-san's expression gradually turned pale.

"You know my power, don't you? That's right, it's psychokinesis. The ability to manipulate matter without physical contact."

That's why, Utsurohara-san carried on proudly.

"I—Moved only the oxygen around your right hand a bit."

Oxygen's a splendid form of matter, right? He added on the words.
Kirako-san's eyes opened wide.

"... Psychokinesis on the molecular level? You've got to be kidding me... At

that output, you can control it that minutely...?"

"Yep. Amazing, ain't it?"

Utsurohara-san grinned.

"You... just how far have you been holding back up to yesterday..."

"Hey, shit happens. That was the order, see. To summarize, the result of my holding back to the Very limit put me at the summit of Rank S. Meaning the title of the Facility's strongest. Ahahah. Incompetence sure is a sin—"

I'd heard it from Orino-san before.

By the movie's setting, Kirako-san was supposedly a Rank A.

A general type just like Kirako-san, and whose abilities' outputs were overwhelmingly higher than hers', Masaki-san was also a Rank A, or so she said. The difference between Ranks B and A weren't that large.

But—Rank S was another world.

Apparently, there was an absolute difference between Rank A and S.

The Rank S Psychics boasting combat capabilities so high they had to be a joke. But forget that. To the man standing at the summit, even the summit was the result of holding back.

"That's why, this time around, it was a huge refresher when I finally got to use my full power. I'm soaring on cloud nine right now. So I can't help but want to test out all sorts of things—"

Those words.

"—Just like this."

From partway, I heard them coming from a completely different direction. As Kirako-san had done one, two minutes before, Utsurohara-san had gotten around to Kirako-san's back before I knew what was going on. As if he had teleported, he had moved behind her in an instant.

I felt a sense of *déjà vu*.

How many times are you going to get their back, in my heart, I gave a retort I'd only ever seen in battle manga. Gazing at the battle manga-esque scene unraveling before my eyes.

"—Wha!?"

"Yes, too bad for you."

Without the time to turn, Kirako-san's neck was grasped in an eagle grip and she was slammed on the ground. Of the two of them, no matter how I looked at it, Kirako-san looked stronger, yet unable to crush off the hand pinning her down, she was affixed to the ground.

"... Why can a special like you teleport?"

"Ahahah. That right there wasn't teleportation. But if it looked that way, I succeeded."

Looking down on Kirako-san, with the tone of a child bragging about their toy, Utsurohara-san carried on.

"That was movement through psychokinesis. Even a Rank B can do it, all you do is work your powers on your own body and move it. All I did was do that at an amazing level."

An amazing level.

While Utsurohara-san expressed it so shoddily, just how fearsome of a level would that have to be? I could understand if my eyes couldn't follow it, but even Kirako-san's couldn't.

"If the initial velocity's the speed of sound then a human eye can't follow it, for starters. Just as it sounds, I just moved faster than the eye. Simple, ain't it?"
"... You monster."

Kirako-san grit her teeth. In embarrassment and irritation, fear and despair. Various negative emotions oozed out from her body.

"Nooow then. I'm getting tired of dealing with you, so it's about time I returned to my job."

As he said that, Utsurohara-san turned towards me. With his reptilian eyes glaring, my heart felt a fear as if he had grasped that in an eagle hold as well. Scary.

Scary, scary, scary.

Because I had witnessed his monstrous combat abilities, my heart was buried up in fear. I couldn't believe myself giving this monster a sermon a few moments ago.

"Get rid of Kagoshima Akira, was it? Why do I gotta get rid of this brat? Well,

I don't really mind either way, 's long as I have my fun... hah!"

After mumbling to himself, Utsurohara-san lowered a fist into Kirako-san's abdomen.

It was like he just touched his hand to it.

Clearly, his stance wasn't one that could get in any power, on top of that, he didn't give any particular windup. I couldn't even call it a one-inch punch.

And yet—the destructive power of that fist wasn't normal.

Receiving a direct impact from that fist, Kirako-san's body bent into a V, as the ground was faintly caved in with her at the center. From her mouth, a voice that couldn't amount to a scream, and bright red blood leaked out.

His fist of psychokinesis had trampled her down far too violently.

"Good night, sweet Kirako, was it? Ahahahahah."

Shaking in laughter as he swung his fist, Utsurohara-san stood. Stepping over Kirako-san with a long stride, he took a step towards me.

"And you're next. Hey, how do you want to bee killed?"

"Ee—"

I ended up falling on my bottom on the spot.

So scared, so scared, I might burst into tears.

I didn't understand the first thing about my predicament.

Why was someone after me of all people? In the first place, what was that battle manga-like development that just unfolded? I wanted to believe it was a movie, but there was no way I could wrap my mind around the notion.

The reality before my eyes overwhelmed me.

When it was a situation so disconnected from reality, it wouldn't permit any mental escapism.

My 'imagination' wouldn't permit the violence called Utsurohara Gouichirou. The unwavering sense of existence he emitted forced me to imagine the reality of his death

Walking carefree, Utsurohara-san said "Boo!" with a light raise of a hand. With that alone, I ended up curling up my body and closing my eyes.

"Ahahah! You're way too skittish. How lame."

He held his stomach and laughed as he approached me. My legs had given

out. Even if he sneered like that, no shame could take sprout. My heart was filled in fear, with no space for any other emotion.

Utsurohara-san approached step by step.

Each step he took, I felt my lifespan shortening a year.

My life's fuse burning second by second.

And it was there.

Utsurohara-san jerked to a stop.

“... Wait you. You’re... not done with me yet...”

It was Kirako-san. Dragging along her wound-ridden body, she grasped one of Utsurohara-san’s legs to stop him in his tracks.

“... Aah?”

A blatantly irritated voice.

The smile vanished from the incarnation of violence.

Lifting up one leg, he lowered it.

Kirako-san’s outstretched arm was forcefully stomped.

The force of psychokinesis—crushed it.

The grating sound of crushed bones made it all the way to me.

“Gaah...”

“Don’t go coming back on your own. Eyesore.”

Krk, krk, he ground at the trampled leg. Kirako’s arm bent in an impossible direction, but even so, he didn’t hesitate. As if to scrupulously squash a cockroach, he continued to stamp.

“Ahh, now I irritated. I’m not going to let you die easily. Until you beg me, ‘please kill me’ I’m going to torment you through and through.”

His terrifyingly level voice reverberated. After he was done stepping on the arm, this time he stepped on her head. The stomping movement wasn’t as violent this time. Like tightening it in a vice, he slowly, slowly put in power. This was no longer a match or challenge.

A one-sided massacre by the strong.

The more the pressure on her head increased, the more pitiful voices leaked from Kirako’s mouth.

They were screams that made me want to cover my ears—it was a scene that

made me want to cover my eyes.

“.....”

Wait a second.

Wait a second there.

That's wrong, isn't it?

I shouldn't be covering my ears.

I shouldn't be covering my eyes.

What the hell are you thinking, Kagoshima Akira?

Kirako-san tried to protect me, didn't she?

Such a kind girl was about to be killed by some incomprehensible guy, isn't she?

Of all things, her head's about to be crushed, isn't it?

There's no way I could overlook such a situation.

If I let my legs give out and cower—I'd never be able to look those girls in the eye.

Those girls who lived so noble like allies of justice out to save the world, we'd never again be able to laugh together.

Don't' close your ears, focus them.

Don't cover your eyes, open them.

Open, my mouth.

Move, my body.

“... Stop.”

My voice shook so much even I found it laughable, the volume was considerably low. Even so, it seemed it reached Utsurohara's ears, as his movements stopped all at once.

“Aah? You say something?”

Turning his neck, he spoke terribly dimly. With eyes looking at a fly that had interrupted him mid-meal, he glared at me.

I put a hand to my aching, quivering legs and stood.

Sucking in a large breath, I confronted him head-on.

“I told you to stop!”

“... Ahahahahahah.”

He laughed.

It was completely different from his prior amused laughter.

When his mouth warped so grandly, his eyes weren't laughing in the slightest.

"... Don't think you're hot stuff... when you're just barely alive at my whim, don't be giving me orders."

His voice didn't attempt to veil his malice, I felt I might reflexively take a step back.

But I didn't retreat.

"Move your leg! Get your foot off of Kirako-san's head this instant!"

"Hmph. Don't want to."

He lowered his leg again.

Kirako-san had already lost consciousness, she didn't even twitch.

No— perhaps...

Perhaps she's— she's dea—

I instinctively leapt out.

And at that moment, I collapsed, some unseen power pushing me down. By that mysterious force, I was slammed down; I could no longer move a single finger.

"... Gi, guh, aaaaH."

"Just crawl and watch, as this woman's head is split like a watermelon!"

Ahah, he laughed.

Utsurohara Gouichirou lowered his foot top to bottom.

All I could do was watch it happen.

My anger at my powerlessness was driving me insane. For the first time in my life, I prayed from the depths of my heart for a miracle.

I— cried out in a trance.

"Mooooooooooooovveeeeeee!"

There.

Utsurohara-san—moved.

No, rather than moved, it would be more accurate to say he flew.

Alongside my shout, Utsurohara-san humped to the side. His slender body did a

dailspin, as like a calling airplane, he collided with the concrete wall. Oddly, it was the same spot Kirako-san had been pinned a moment before.

“... Guhaah.”

Falling to the ground, he raised a groan. Blood dripped from his head, wetting half of his face.

“... Urgh, ah, b-brat... the hell did you, do...?”

His blood-soaked visage flared at me. Twenty percent anger, eighty percent shock, I’d say. He looked to be surprised at his own predicament. And it went without saying I was far more surprised than him.
U-umm.

What just happened?

“Shithead... no wonder I was ordered to get rid of you. Thought you were just a brat, but I see you were hiding some sort of power...”

Ignoring my hesitation, Utsurohara-san spoke.

Power?

My... power?

The sensation of some unseeable force suppressing me had already disappeared, so I stood.

I looked down over my own hands.

Strongly—I clenched a fist.

“... Hahah.”

A smile naturally leaked.

I was so happy I didn’t know what to do with myself.

In a life-or-death situation, does that mean my sleeping power had awakened? It was a hot, blazing development, yet quite a self-serving convenient development at that.

Well, I couldn’t care less about the rationality.

The only definite thing was that these hands contained the power to blow that irritating bastard away. Readyng my fists, I spoke out with fortitude.

“It’s on, Utsurohara Gouichirou! I’m never going to forgive you!”

And like that, my awakening had been set in motion.



Chapter 5: Shiori

“Oh no it hasn’t.”

There.

From beside me came a level-headed retort. A familiar, gentle voice stroked my ear.

The one there was—

“O-Orino-san...”

Before I knew it, standing beside me was Orino-san.

Orino Shiori.

As her name implied, she had appeared on the battlefield like a bookmark. That is to say—stuck in unbeknownst to the characters of the story.

“... Good morning, Kagoshima-kun. I’m sorry, I overslept a bit.”

After saying only that, Orino-san took a step forward to stand before me. She was dressed peculiarly. A monotone dress with black and white as the keynotes. One I must have seen somewhere before, or so I thought as I probed through my memory. I quickly recalled it.

These were the clothes Yomiga-san wore.

However, the black and white coloring had been reversed.

Like a game’s player two colors, the designs were identical but only the color palette had changed.

But if I had to say, the coloring Orino-san was wearing seemed to be somewhat more fitting. I got the feeling this one was the player one.

I got the feeling this girl was the original.

“Orino... so it was your doing. Surprise attacks are lame.”

Utsurohara-san’s mouth warped as he detestably spat up the words. It did seem it was Orino-san’s power that sent him flying back there. And I ended up misunderstanding it as my own power awakening.

“.....”

Whoa, how embarrassing! I’m so embarrassed I wanna die!

I totally got in over my head there! I was totally up to fight right there!
“I’m never going to forgive you!” or something, I said something really cool!
Ignoring me as I held my head and writhed, Orino-san confronted Utsurohara-san.

“Hah. Looks like you’re finally up. Got six hours of sleep? I don’t know how much sleep’s a necessity, but when people do work, they sleep nice and sound...”

“You think you’re so great because you’re the fruit of the Facility’s work? Cage of Death Remnant, was it? An existence born in the Cage called the facility, where countless deaths pile up... To start with, the Facility was being used with the objective of creating you.”

“.....”

“n wait, me and you are supposed to be allies, for argument’s sake, you know? I had fun crushing the organization that’s gone and done with as ordered. What design’s led you to launch an attack against me?”

“.....”

Orino-san didn’t say anything.

Clad in a dignified aura, she stood still where she was.

She was different from usual, I thought.

Her clothes went without saying, but how should I put it, her presence was evidently different from her usual self. Quiet and gentle, and somewhat fleeting.

I knew this atmosphere all too well.

The current Orino-san—closely resembled that childhood friend of mine.

“Ignoring me, eh? Ahh, well whatever. For now, an eye for an eye. Let me smack you.”

Again, Utsurohara-san vanished.

The next instant, he appeared in front of Orino-san.

Movements I could only contemplate as teleportation. According to him, it was psychokinesis at an amazing level, but from my point of view, it was the same thing.

It didn’t change the fact I couldn’t perceive it.

Utsurohara-san swung his fist as he had before.

What had broken Kirako-san before—the psychokinetic fist.

Technique and form were a distant memory.

As if to sneer at all fighting techniques, nothing more than violence.

Utsurohara Gouichiro's fist—hammered right into the face's center.

The destructive force of the punch struck into the bridge of the nose was fearsome, and just like that, I thought it might punch straight through. It was a fist with propulsion and penetration power beyond my imagination.

I was worried we might end up with Kinnikuman's black hole phenomenon.

Of course, while it didn't pierce through, even so, it dug in enough to put the nose's height at a negative. I needn't even mention that the nose broke. Perhaps the cheekbones had a depression fracture.

The might of Utsurohara-san's fist wasn't normal after all.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaa—"

Letting off an unsightly scream rolling on the ground.

The face that ate the blow head-on was visibly left in sorry sight. Its form hollowed in the face of a shape, its visage changed into a distortion. A broken nose dripped endlessly with blood.

The sight was far too painful, and unsightly.

"Uu... aa, aaa... aaaaah."

Containing their face, writhing around in agony. Squatting on the ground like a hornworm, continuously leaking pained groans.

I was... at a loss for wards.

Honestly speaking, I didn't know what was what.

I looked aside.

There—Orino-san stood.

Not a step away from where she had been before, she sternly stood where she was. She looked down over a crouching Utsurohara-san with terribly calm eyes.

Right.

What Utsurohara-san's fist stuck unto... was Utsurohara-san's face.

You might not get what I'm trying to say, but the truth was as it was, so that's all I could say.

... Dammit.

I lament having already brought up Jean Pierre Polnareff. This was the moment I should have used that parody.

What you just saw and touched was—

When I thought Utsurohara-san suddenly appeared before Orino-san, he suddenly smacked his own face. The fist I thought he lowered straight forward suddenly did a complete one-eighty and hammered into the bridge of his nose. With enough force to cave it in.

He completely reaped what he sowed.

And in a sense, played a part in his own demise.

Orino-san hadn't done anything.

She simply stood there.

"... Guh, aah, b-bitch..."

Holding up his face, he muttered in a cracked voice.

It was common knowledge that a fractured nose would cause a massive nosebleed, and Utsurohara-san was no exception, shedding a vast sway of blood. Try as he may to contain it with his hand, it showed no visible effect.

"... What did, you, do..."

"I didn't know anything."

Orino-san said.

A voice so composed I would call it unnatural.

"I simply wished for it."

"You... what...?"

"I simply wished for your own fist to turn on you. That's all there is to it."

She wouldn't explain anymore.

At her far-too-straightforward words,

"... Don't screw with me!"

Utsurohara-san scattered nose blood as he cried out.

"You may have awakened, but when you get down to it, your power is psychokinesis! The same power as me! I'm sure you're manipulating the electric signals in my body or something. Like I did with the oxygen before!"

Electric signals.

The human body was moved by a feeble electronic current, that was common knowledge even I knew. Something about neurons and synapses, I get the feeling I learned it in biology sometime recently.

Meaning Orino-san manipulated those electrons with psychokinesis to take over Utsurohara-san's body and redirect it?

Like how Utsurohara-san could control oxygen on a molecular level?

If something like that was possible then, I see, it would be a fearsome ability.

"Hah, ahahahah! When you see the trick, it's simple! I let my guard down back there, but now I'm going to be on the constant lookout for your psychokinesis. Do that, and such fine manipulations will surely be impossible! Ahahahah!"

His broken nose sprayed blood he laughed.

In regards to Utsurohara-san's maddened smile, "Wrong," Orino-san lightly shook her head.

"My power was psychokinesis because this power was incomplete. It was incomplete so it ended up looking that way. My power is—something else entirely."

She said in a somewhat self-abasing tone.

It was by no means a boastful sort of cadence.

"Shut it!"

Utsurohara-san rejected her words.

"Panicking because I hit the nail on the head!? No more... I won't let you off

anymore. Kill, kill, kill... I'll gouge out your guts and play with you like a yo-yo!"

Screaming out in an enraged expression, he held his right hand at the heavens.

And—from top to bottom, he lowered it like lightning.

Even I could tell something had snapped inside of Utsurohara-san. With the vague remaining remnants of his limiter all coming off, he was attempting to draw out power beyond his limit.

To speak from results, I had no idea what he was trying to do.

Was there some terrifying sure-kill move hidden in the world, or some trump card he was concealing? Or could it be, could it be, he still had around three forms left?

I couldn't say.

The reason being—nothing happened.

"... Aah? Heh?"

Utsurohara-san raised a feeble voice and tried lowering his hand again.

Even so—nothing happened.

A swing and a swing, he repeated the motion a number of times yet the result didn't change.

".. Hah? Y-you've got to be kidding me. W-what's happening? Why can't I use psychokinesis... eeh?"

"You're not a psychic anymore."

Orino-san said.

"I wished it so."

She repeated the same line as before.

Thrusting out a fact a clear as day.

"... W-w-what does that even mean? The hell are you talking about...?"

Utsurohara-san's eyes became the eyes of one looking at some unknown monster.

Those were likely the very same eyes I had been observing him with before. At this moment, Orino-san was making an existence I could only see as a monster cower, she was threatening him. This was a difference in combat

potential that made it even idiotic to use the word combat potential. In a paper airplane contest, like a jumbo jet was suddenly mixed in—or perhaps, when someone got all stuck up thinking level 99 was the limit, a level 9999 suddenly appeared.

That expression fit spot on with the battle before my eyes.

“Utsurohara-san. Just disappear already. You’re getting to be an eyesore.”

The next instant.

Behind Utsurohara Gouichirou ran a crack.

There wasn’t supposed to be anything behind him, yet a crevice definitely was born. That crack spread without sound, surpassing Utsurohara-san’s height in no time.

The crack faintly opened. Within it—a darkness continuing to eternity.

“... U-Uwaaaaah!”

When he turned, noticing the abnormality behind him, Utsurohara-san simply warped his already muddled face even further as he raised a shriek.

“W-what is, this...! D-don’t screw—”

To escape the crack behind him, he sprinted forward, not a glance to the side. But—there was Orino-san.

The girl who was standing beside me, for some reason she was there.

“Wha...”

At first, I thought it was teleportation.

But I soon knew it was different.

These past few minutes, I had witnessed various paranormal movement skills—for example, Kirako-san’s teleport; for example, Utsurohara-san’s fake teleport through psychokinesis.

But Orino-san’s movement was clearly different from anything they showed. If I had to say, Kirako-san’s movement came with the ardor, or perhaps preparedness of, “I’m going to move now”. To her, no matter what supernatural power she was using, it was still movement in the end.

And yet Orino Shiori’s movement had nothing.

I didn’t even know if it was ‘movement’ to begin with.

As if to her, her existence being there was merely inevitable, she was naturally

there.

In manga terms, if a character was suddenly drawn in later after the fact.

In novel term, a sentence was suddenly inserted after the fact.

It was such an unreasonable, abnormal movement.

“.....”

Maintaining her silence, Orino-san softly pushed Utsurohara-san on the chest. With that alone, his balance crumbled, making him collapse backwards. Towards the rift in space—he fell.

“Eh, no wai, eee, u, u, uaaaaaaAaaaaa—”

With his death cries mercilessly sealed in the crevice, they completely cut off like the change of a channel.

[IMAGE]

Utsurohara Gouichirou’s existence had vanished from here.

“... U-umm, is he, dead...?”

“Don’t worry. He’s not dead.”

My monologue was answered by Orino-san, who was already standing beside me. Her movement was too natural, it almost made me hallucinate she was there from the start.

The current Orino-san was far to natural... precisely why something was off.

“That there wasn’t per say a door to hell. It was just a door in time and space. I sent him to a world different from this one. It’s a world where dragons and the such naturally exist, so now that he’s lost his psychokinesis, he might have a hard time making it there, but he needs at least that much punishment.”

... Even if you tell me it’s just a door in time and space...

From my point of view, it was just as hard to imagine as a door to hell would be.

“Kugayama-san’s fine too. She’s already healed.”

At those words, I hurriedly peeked at Kirako-san.

While she was still unconscious, the traces of injury on her body had all banished. The concrete and ground stayed the same, but she alone as if time had been rewound—or perhaps like she hadn’t incurred the injuries from the

start, she was completely in her original state.

“... It might be different from healed. There was no treatment or medication or anything like that, I just wished for it”

The voice came with a lonesome ring.

“Orino-san...”

The enemy to defeat gone and Kirako-san’s safety confirmed, I looked at her anew.

Orino-san didn’t try to look me in the eye, she simply faced forward. Her profile was neither laughing nor angry. If I had to say, it wasn’t expressionless, but a natural human expression.

A peculiar emotion enveloped me.

When now she was supposed to be more monstrous than a monster, I didn’t think to be scared. To take it even further, she didn’t look strong in the slightest.

Like god, and yet like a newly born child.

With such a terribly unbalanced state, yet it looked as if there was no greater completion than that in and of itself.

“Orino-san, you’re—”

“《Book Marker》. I see you’ve gotten to use it without issue.”

From nowhere in particular, I heard a voice.

“When you get down to it, psychic powers are largely divided between a perception that surpasses the normal senses: ESP, and the power to move things without physical interaction: PK. The representative cases of ESP would have to be x-ray vision and mind reading, while the representative case of PK would be its namesake psychokinesis. However, in the end, as some forms of ESP make use of PK, the classification is merely for convenience’s sake—that’s right. That’s precisely why I turned my attention to PK, meaning psychokinesis.”

Smoothly singing a song, the voice continued on.

“Psychokinesis is the ability to manipulate matter without having to hold it in your hand—to manipulate matter. If you think about it, doesn’t that sound like a terrifying ability? Doesn’t it sound like a power way too omnipotent? For

example, manipulate the wind, and you can become a wind user. The atmosphere's a splendid form of matter. And manipulating the atmosphere means you manipulate fire, a form of combustion reaction. Naturally, you can control the water and earth as well. Haha, one power and you've got the four elements as a complete set."

I heard footsteps.

The sound of leather-soled sandals rubbing against the ground.

"That's why I thought to try seeing how far that power could be expanded. By following psychokinesis to its logical conclusion, I thought to have it reborn as something else. To make it so what it could manipulate wasn't restricted to matter, but time, and space, and fate, and cause and effect... couldn't I create a power to manipulate everything in this world?"

The quiet footsteps gradually closed in.

"The organization was made for that sake, and the one born within it was the Cage of Death Remnant. The ability she holds has surpassed 'control' into the power to 'rule'. Meaning the 『Book Marker』 is the ultimate power of rule. The Cage of Death Remnant is capable of manipulating any and everything to her will."

Gray hair close to white, and a gray kinagashi close to black.

"Before her, this world is little more than a scribble on paper. It is possible for her to change it however she wants, and if she doesn't like it, she can throw the paper away and draw something anew. To put it very simply, it's a power that lets you 'do anything'."

The sort of monotone looks that snatched color away from the world.

"Kai."

I said.

Shinose Kai.

My childhood friend with slow steps walked all the way up to Orino-san and I.

"Hey Akira."

He made the same smile as ever. Sweet and bitter, after he smiled at me with

a smile fitting of him, he shifted his gaze to Orino-san.

I looked over the two of them.

They both clad their body in monotone fashion.

But Orino-san's distinct white and black, and his colors where the boundaries were ambiguous seemed somewhat contrastive.

When they were so similar, something wasn't locking into place.

"How do you feel, 'Orino-san'? how does it feel to obtain an almighty power surpassing even god?"

"Shinose... kai."

Orino-san glared at Kai. In her eyes I could read anger and fear, and just a little hatred.

"Was it your kindness that sent Utsurohara Gouishirou to another world? I was sure you were going to do something more torturous. You really are kind, 'Orino-san'."

"... Why. Why did you give Utsurohara-san an order like that!? Putting Kagoshima-kun and Kirako-san through such...!?"

"If I did that, you'd use your powers, right?"

"...!?"

While Kai said it so calmly, Orino-san widened her eyes at a loss for words.

"Unless it's to protect someone, you'll never fight with all your power. That is the sort of human Orino Shiori is. And in order to defeat the strongest psychokinesis Utsurohara Gouichirou, you would have no choice but to cling to the powers you'd only just awoken to."

"You can't mean..."

His talkative prattle turned Orino-san's expression pale.

"Meaning my goal was a trial run of the 《Book Marker》. It was for that reason that I kept Utsurohara Gouichirou as the underdog."

"... So it was all on the palm of your hand?"

"No, I wouldn't say so. Truth be told, I didn't intend to drag Akira into it. I'd have the substitute play 'Orino Shiori', and as always, without knowing a thing, I intended to keep him as an outsider to these events."

But, said Kai, looking at me for a moment.

A tired, bitter smile surfaced on his face.

"Akira... saw through it. That Orino Shiori was a fake. I had an inkling in the back of my mind, but I never thought he really would notice. Even if he did, I anticipated it taking a little more time, but for him to notice on day one."

Yomiga Eri and Orino Shiori's swap surprise.

I noticed with one look.

Only I ended up noticing.

"From there it was a huge rush to change to the spare plan. Have Utsurohara target Akira, and after waiting for you to awaken from your slumber, to inform you of that truth. Of course, the move to the spare plan was done by the arbitrary judgement of my partner. Albeit, if she didn't do it, I myself would personally have given the order to Utsurohara."

"....."

While Kai's composure didn't crumble, Orino-san looked baffled. After a few seconds of silence, "... Why did you make me?" in a wrung-out voice Orino-san said.

"Why did you do this? Why... was it me? What exactly... do you want to accomplish?"

It was a quiet exclamation. The sort of shout one gives through their tears. Just a moment ago, she had overwhelmed Utsurohara-san with godlike powers, but now she looked oh so small.

In regards to Orino-san's expression snapping at him in bitterness, Kai quietly closed his eyes.

"Of course, I'll tell you everything. It is my responsibility to do so. But before that, can you give me a little time?"

"Time?"

Orino-san asked back with a dubious face. There, Kai opened his eyes and turned to me.

"At the end, I want to talk a bit with Akira. This may be the end, after all."

Regardless of what I thought on the matter, he roughly gripped my hand.

In her surprise, Orino-san called for him to halt, but Kai didn't stop.

"Let's settle this, Akira. Everything between us."

And Kai took me off somewhere.

It was the first time I ever experienced being spirited away.

Chapter 6: I Noticed

“What is a story, Akira?”

Kai said once he’d gone through the grand gist of things. He sounded like he was asking me, but truly he was asking himself. That was his peculiar way of asking questions.

“This is what I think. A story means that someone will undoubtedly have to face misery.”

Failing to grasp the meaning, I tilted my head.

“A story where everyone becomes happy—doesn’t exist in this world.”

“There’s no guarantee for that one. I think there are plenty of stories that end with everyone smiling, and wait, I do think those stories are the majority.”

“You’re wrong. That’s the terrifying trap that lies in the story. Certainly, as you said, there are loads of stories out there that have happy endings. But that’s simply for the main character and the ones around them, all that means is that the main cast is happy.”

“That’s...”

“If it ends with the main members in a blessed state, the reader misinterprets the story as a happy ending. But isn’t that strange? A story has antagonists and side characters too.”

“.....”

Unable to refute his words, I stayed silent.

Sure enough, a story where every character that appeared became happy might not exist in the world. The last boss is often defeated in the end, while the nameless mob characters are often easily slaughtered to demonstrate the enemy’s cruelty and strength.

As if they were sacrifices for the sake of the main cast’s happiness.

“Mysteries are a good example. The detective role comfortably resolves the murder, and before long heads off towards the next incident—but the victim is already dead, days of paying for their crime await the culprit, and the story closes with the victim’s bereaved family in sorrow. You see? The people who

become happy are overwhelmingly fewer, aren't they?"

"... I don't really read mysteries so I don't really know, but they definitely do have that sort of image."

"It's alright for bad people to end up miserable, that recognition exists universally in human society. But I—I think it would be nice if everyone could be happy."

"Everyone can be happy?"

"Whether they be vice or virtue, main character or side role, if everyone can smile and spend their days, don't you think that would be the best?"

He said, with a bitter and sweet smile.

I couldn't respond to those words.

Live ten years, and you figure it out whether you want to or not. Having everyone happy, such a dream-like situation could never happen in this reality. A majority of the time, someone's happiness would be tied to another's misfortune, and the reverse was also a possibility.

That's why what he said was an empty theory, and pure idealism.

Unless someone experienced unhappiness, neither a human life nor story could ever be established. Yet he was exceedingly serious, no fragment of messing around, he earnestly spoke of a dream.

"If someone has to become unhappy for it, then simply make it that the story never begins. You simply have to stagnate it, forever and ever at the prologue."

As he said that, I could see a bottomless sorrow in his eyes.

Dark feelings as if he had witnessed human death hundreds, thousands of time, layering and layering over one another in the depths of those eyes.

"That's why I want to make it. The 『Neverending Prologue』—"

We were on the grounds of the Inari shrine. Kai and I sat side by side on the steps of the inner sanctuary.

The place Kai chose for the end—was the spot we often played together. Of course, I couldn't tell whether this really was that Inari Shrine or not. It might be some false world he created, or perhaps a spiritual world of sorts.

Well, at this point, no matter what happened, I wouldn't be surprised.

I—already had it all explained to me.

For example, that Kagurai-senpai came from the future.

For example, that Kurisu-chan was a witch from another world.

For example, that Kikyouin-san was an onmyouji.

For example, that Orino-san was a psychic—or rather, an existence created for the sake of Kai's goal.

For example—everything about my childhood friend.

The 'Miniature Garden Plan' begun in Kagurai-senpai's era: the salvation of all of humanity by the hand of a manufactured god, a grand and absurd plan. From it he was born, an artificial god. Given 『Finishing Stroke』, an inhuman abnormal power, an existence compelled into saving the world

Shinose Kai.

Apparently, everything up to now had been on the palm of his hand.

My meeting with Orino-san, Kagurai-senpai, Kurisu-chan. That lady in the strange suit ten years ago—meaning my chance encounter with Orino-san. The psychic battle between Masaki-san and Orino-san.

The unnatural transfer of Kikyouin-san who was originally supposed to go to a high school around Mt. Osore. Tsuchimikado-san's scam. Tama-chan's rampage.

A young boy I didn't know called Saijou Mutsuki. My meeting with Yomiga-san.

The looping phenomenon that we were dragged into over training camp.

Shakujii Hihiko-san who came to observe Kagurai-senpai. Kagurai-senpai's fierce battle with AMLO.

Griel-kun's visit. Orino-san sealed in another world. Kikyouin-sn and Tama-chan, and Kurisu-chan's battle. The exit of the boy known as Saijou Mutsuki.

After that—Orino-san's birthday. Switching out with Yomiga-san. Utsurohara-san's raid. Orino-san's awakening.

[IMAGE]

It had all—gone according to Shinose Kai's plan.

"No, I wouldn't say it was all in my ballpark. There were some unforeseen situations here and there. For every convenient turn of chance, there was an inconvenient one as well. So instead of saying it turned out exactly as I planned, I'd say exactly as I'd outlined. There were things that didn't go as I wanted, but in the end, I managed to reach the point I was aiming for."

After saying that much, he momentarily cut off his words and looked at me.

"You're calmer than I thought."

Those calm but somewhat sorrowful eyes stared at me.

"When you noticed everything, I thought you'd be more surprised or disoriented."

"I am surprised, I'll give you that, but... it feels like I missed the right time. There were far too many things to be surprised about today, my meter's already blown out."

I noticed everything.

When I had never noticed anything before, come so far, I was made to notice it all.

I was one to reject the slightest shred of abnormality, but thanks to Kai explaining it idiotically scrupulously—undoing each and every turn of the knot, I had no choice left but to accept it.

The curse of ten years melted away.

"So what do you think about me?"

"What do I think..."

"I've continued to deceive you for ten years, what do you think about that?"

"... I'm troubled to comment. Perhaps I really should resent you, but this is so sudden I can't really muster it, or rather... at this point, what exactly am I supposed to do about it? Well, it's undeniably a shock."

I said with a bitter smile.

"Looks like I didn't understand the first thing about you, Kai..."

"That's it! This is the moment worthy of that line!"

Kai gave a mischievous smile.

"But you know, I still don't know if you were really deceiving me in the first place."

"What do you mean?"

"I haven't heard the rest of the story yet."

"I see."

A quiet nod, then Kai returned to his tale.

"Making everyone happy is my one and only goal. What I've been programmed for. That fact hasn't changed from the moment I awoke."

Intermittently, in the tone as if he was telling some old fairy tale, Kai spoke of the first half of his own life. A half that dragged on far too long.

"When I sprouted a sense of self, the first action I took—was to save a certain young girl. I had just been born, I was unsteadily teetering around without aim, when I coincidentally happened upon girl tormented by illness. The time was somewhere around the middle ages, the place a European countryside."

The girl was afflicted by a disease incurable at the time. While her house was never by any means affluent, even so, night and day, her parents desperately worked to contrive the funds for her treatment.

That being the case, the results were unfavorable, it seems.

"So I healed that girl. Without thinking much about it, if it's a disease why not cure it, I thought."

Without thinking much about it, that preface was far too unfitting of Kai, and I felt an off sensation. But I immediately accepted it. The newborn Kai surely didn't boast his current mature personality. The him I knew was a him eroded into shape by the waves of time.

"And the girl showed a full recovery. When she woke up one morning, she was suddenly in perfect health. Her parents burst into dance. 'It's a miracle, thank God,' they said. Of course, I never showed my form, but I felt like I was being praised, and I did feel accomplished."

But, said he.

"That was only for a moment."

"... Why?"

"The doctor treating the girl couldn't live anymore. If the disease was healed, they wouldn't have to pay his high fees anymore. But to the doctor, those medical expenses were his lifeline. He carried a large amount of debt, and no longer able to return it, he spent his days chased by loan sharks."

And so—I saved him.

He said.

"I didn't create any money. That would mess up the economy. When he was trying to flee outside the country, I assisted him from the shadow and ensured

him a safe route. He was fleeing the country with nothing left to lose, so that doctor was also greatly pleased, ‘Thank God,’ he said.”

I couldn’t say anything. When I saw the sad look on his face, I could somewhat see where the story was going.

“Next up, the lenders who had let the money get away were to be purged by the boss who controlled the whole area. They had failed a job, it was only natural in the underground. And so—I saved them.”

“.....”

“When that happened, next—No, let’s just stop it at that. There’ll be no end. Anyways, I kept repeating something like that. Whenever I saved someone, someone else faced misfortune. When I saved that someone else, again came another. The moment I thought everything was finally over, next, in a completely different spot, some new misfortune had begun. And I would save them again...”

It was like counting the grains of sand in the desert—like endlessly calculating out pi, a stream of events that would never end. Any normal person would be able to live more arbitrarily. If they spotted an old woman lost at the side of the road, they could just tell them the path and be satisfied with that. Even when there was no guarantee that old woman would reach her destination.

“When I was in the midst of repeating that, one day, in a deserted back alley, I came upon a single young woman about to be violated.”

“V-violated?”

“Does mentioning the word rape make it easier to understand? The girl was being threatened by a brawny man with a knife, she might be violated at any moment. What’s more, that child, on closer inspection was that very same girl, the first one I ever saved.”

The girl with the incurable ailment, huh.

“I—didn’t save her.”

“Eh?”

I was startled. I didn’t get what he meant.
Didn’t save her?

"W-why?"

"The man violating her had previous offenses of burglary, theft, and rape, he was trash with absolutely no hopes of redemption. The sort of pervert who felt a rush of pleasure by forcefully violating a woman, what's more, the sort of garbage who simply couldn't contain himself."

"In that case, even more so, someone like that should—"

"Someone like that should—what?"

As he said that, Kai glared at me with eyes as cold as eyes. Like my heart had been clenched, a shiver ran down my spine.

"Should I have captured him and handed him over to the police? Or should I have just slaughtered a piece of human refuse like that?"

"....."

"Akira. I said it, didn't I? I want to make everyone happy. I was made to do so. It was for that reason I was born."

I lost my words. The value I placed on 'everyone', between me and him, that difference was greater than the earth and the heavens. As different as man and god.

His sense of values was—far too equal.

"There are all sorts of trash in the world. The sorts who find happiness in violating people, the sorts who feel pleasure by killing, those that feel their worth in living by dragging other people down... What happiness means, see, it varies from person to person detestably so."

"....."

"That's why I didn't save her. Couldn't save her. Unable to reach compromise with the contradiction within me, I no longer knew what to do... and I abandoned the girl I had saved myself. Again and again, she wailed out, 'Save me God!'"

The sort of self-abasing voice that pierced through my body resounded horridly through my ears.

— They don't know anything about the futility, the pointless, the despair of making the world however you want it...

The words of some time replayed in my head. Those words I only took faintly

at the time, come now, they displayed more vivid contour. Even so, all the likes of myself could understand was no doubt nothing more than a dred of what he carried.

“What came after that were days of failure and regret.”

He said.

Saving people time and again, each time hurting more, trying various ways, repeating failures, wavering and mulling, repeating his efforts—

“—Yet even so, I couldn’t make everyone happy. Even if I used every bit of my power, I couldn’t bring peace to the world.”

Gazed at through his sorrowful eyes, I tried imagining it.

If it were me—if I had powers like god, what would I do? All I could think up on the spot was stopping wars, and healing the people tormented by injury or ailment. But if I was asked if that would make everything go well, I wouldn’t really know. What’s more—what someone like me could think up was definitely something Kai had already tried out.

The result was days of failure and regret.

But.

Even so—Kai didn’t give up.

“And what I’ve reached is a plan to use the 《Book Marker》 to create the 《Neverending Prologue》.”

A story that never begins.

Where no one has to be unfortunate, a plan I could only think of as an empty dream.

“You’ve personally experienced the absurd power of the 《Book Marker》, haven’t you?”

“Ah, yeah. It’s an amazing power,” I ambiguously nodded.

A literal ‘power to do anything’ was far too fearsome, and honestly speaking, I couldn’t quite grasp it. It was so simple it became contrarily difficult.

Even the dragon balls that came with a sales pitch of being able to grant any wish had various restrictions placed on them.

“It’s so fearsome, at this point you can’t even call foul play. An ability one wouldn’t throw into a battle manga even by mistake. On top of being

completely uninteresting, it's an ability no one can win against, after all."

"... But can that 'power to do anything' make everyone happy?"

I asked. The 《Finishing Stroke》 granted to Kai was, from my point of view, an absurd power as it is. Could something impossible even with that power become possible with Orino-san's?

"As I explained, 《Book Marker》 is the ultimate power of rule. While I can only repeat for a different outcome, she can freely commence actions in this world from outside its bounds—for example, controlling human nature is right in her ballpark."

"Controlling human nature?"

I swallowed my breath at that turbulent phrase. He made just a bit of an amused smile.

"By ruling the brains of all of humanity, it is possible for her to forcefully make everyone think 'I am happy'. Something on that level, if it's her, should be a piece of cake."

He said and gazed straight at me. Without a single spot of mirth, they were clear eyes. I could instinctively tell his words were no lie.
That's why I immediately refuted.

"Such a thing... there's no way it's for the best. You can't just change someone's personality... if making the brain feel happy was all that was needed, it's no different from drugs."

"The reason drugs are prohibited is because normal people find drug-induced people to be unpleasant, and that's all she wrote. Well, of course, there are side effects to consider, but—then Akira. Let's try a thought experiment. Let's say there was a drug with no side effects at all, and just taking it would make you happy. Could someone who kept taking it, believing 'I am happy' really be called happy?"

After thinking a little, "I don't think so," I answered.

I was sure that was somewhat different from a human happiness.

"I thought you'd say that. But Akira. The reason you think so is because you are viewing the act of taking the drug from a third person's eyes. If all of humanity took the drug, there won't be anyone left who thinks the action is

bad. Meaning—everyone will be happy.”

“.....”

“No one will suffer, no one will be unfortunate, neither sorrow nor hatred will exist, and precisely for that reason, ups and downs and all developments won’t exist either. A boring world, disqualified from telling any story at all—that is the 《Neverending Prologue》.”

I—couldn’t say anything.

The world he spoke of was by the letter a world where everyone could be happy.

I could understand it, logically speaking. But my heart simply wouldn’t concede. I didn’t want to believe such a thing could be happiness.

“I get how you feel. But there’s no use in us arguing here. The key to it all has already left my hand—”

And Kai shifted his gaze to the shrine grounds. Where the trees swayed and rustled in the breeze, someone was walking towards us.

It was Orino-san.

Wearing a dress of distinct white and black, it was Orino Shiori.

“Hey. You came later than I thought.”

Once she had made it right beside the steps, Kai called out in a cheerful voice.

“I set it so only humans I invited could enter this space, but... before you, that rule might as well not exist. Whichever way, you were still slow to come. If you were up to it, you should have been able to make it here in an instant.”

“.....”

“If it were to defeat Utsurohara Gouichirou—meaning to protect someone, it couldn’t be helped that you used your power. But you didn’t want to use this terrible power for your own sake alone. You were thinking along those lines, but you were so worried for Kagoshima Akira, who was led off by someone like me, that at the end of your deliberation, you ended up using it in the end. Was it something like that?”

“...!”

He must have hit the mark. Orino-san vexingly bit her lip.

“Now then, daughter of mine. You were listening in, weren’t you? Why don’t

you weigh in on it.”

A few seconds later, she hesitantly opened her mouth.

“I... won’t accept you.”

Orino-san said.

It was the same outlook as me.

In regards to Shinose Kai—a complete denial.

“I see. I don’t mind it either way.”

Kai said so easily I felt let down.

“If you deny it, then there’s nothing I can do about it.”

At that moment—

An immense off-feeling was born in my chest. Like some hazy something I had felt the whole time revealed its form as a clear foreign substance.

But—can something like that happen? Was such an elementary mistake even possible?

“W-wait a second.”

I hurriedly cut in between the two.

“Kai... I’d like to think not, but...”

I timidly asked.

“Is the current Orino-san—stronger than you?”

《Book Marker》. The ultimate power of rule. The power to do anything.

While I had forgotten it the whole time, while I had naturally let it slide.

When you think about it, it was unnatural to the extreme.

If it can do anything—then does that mean it can even defeat Kai?

“Yeah—that’s right.”

In regards to my question, Kai nodded as if it was only natural. It was a reply that carried with it the sort of soft disdain as if to say, don’t ask something so obvious.

“《Book Marker》far surpasses my 《Finishing Stroke》. While they’re both powers stationed outside the bounds of this world, their outputs are on

different levels entirely. I've got a few other assorted skills, but even if I used them all, I'm no match for her."

"... B-but you don't have some sort of control switch or something? You have a means to control Orino-san, don't you?"

"There's no such thing. If I could control it, it wouldn't be a 'power to do anything' would it. In that instance, the power itself would contradict and fail."

The way he said it as if it were nothing at all only accelerated my confusion. Orino-san also made a bewildered face. I'm sure just like me, she anticipated Kai had some sort of trump card—some sort of means to control her. And yet, he came with no plan at all.

To think, at the end of the end, there was nothing at all.

"That is the sole flaw in my plan, and a flaw I have no means of patching up. Saijou Mutsuki condemned me for it too. Said he didn't want to believe he was chasing someone who came up with such a shoddy plan."

Saijou Mutsuki.

The name he mentioned before.

It seems that person was someone who stood against Kai. Who revolted against god, and as a result faced retribution.

"Now, what do you do, Cage of Death Remnant?"

Kai gazed at Orino-san.

"Are you irritated at me for making you? Do you resent me for forcing on you such an incomprehensible power? Do you feel you can't endorse my train of thought?"

"That is..."

"Then just kill me."

Kai said without hesitation.

His expression didn't change. It was the same refreshing face as ever.

"While I boast an undying body, you should be able to end me with ease. It's even possible for you to erase my very existence—no, perhaps I should put it like me. You are the only one capable of killing me."

While Kai said whatever he wanted, Orino-san didn't say a thing. She had lost

her words, simply covering her mouth. When she was supposed to be the stronger one, when there was supposed to be an overwhelming gap in their abilities.

And yet, she was the one who looked cornered.

“... I, you see, I’m tired. I’m tired of playing god.”

Kai ran a hand through his gray hair. On his mouth, a feeble self-deprecating smile formed.

“It feels like I’m reading the same novel over, and over, and over again. The fact there was no existence above me was nothing but suffering—and so, right now, I feel just a little bit pleasant. Like a load’s been lifted off my shoulders.”

And—he gazed at Orino-san.

“Finally, an existence superior to me has been born.”

“... Then you—”

Orino-san’s expression largely warped, she painfully opened her mouth.

“Made me in order to kill yourself? Is this some twisted roundabout suicide...!?”

“Of course not. I won’t say I want to die. It’s just, at the end, I felt a bit like leaving it to someone else.”

“... Leaving what?”

“I wanted to try and let someone else be judge and jury for a change. An existence superior to me giving judgment. I wanted to taste what that felt like.”

Leaving it to someone else.

Having lived a directionless life of heavy responsibility to ‘make everyone happy’, perhaps this was the last bit of selfishness he could show. The meager wish of an existence standing higher than any from the moment he was born.

“Now what do you do, oh daughter of mine? Do you succeed my will, rule all of humanity and complete the 《Neverending Prologue》? Or will you deny me, destroy me, and take over as the new god reigning over this world?”

I don’t mind either way, he said with a satisfied smile. Seeing his somewhat content expression, a thought came to me. Perhaps Kai had been living for now, for this very moment.

Not knowing whether what he did was right or not, in his days of groping through the dark, perhaps he wanted to be evaluated by someone. Perhaps he wanted an existence higher than his own to show him the way.

“I, I...”

Yet the single girl who became an existence surpassing God shook. The girl who had all the pain and responsibility Kai shouldered pushed onto her at once looked like she was about to be crushed by that load.

“Think over it all you want. But—you might reach your answer surprisingly quickly.”

At that instant, the space before my eyes warped as a crevice was born. From that crevice just barely large enough for a single human to pass, appeared that girl identical to Orino Shiori.

“Yomiga-san...”

I said. But Yomiga-san ignored me and walked over to her master, Kai.

“Master. I have returned.”

“Welcome back,” said Kai.

She must have changed at some point, as Yomiga-san’s garments had returned to her usual monotone dress.

A dress with the complete opposite coloring of the one Orino-san was wearing now.

A player two-like palette swap.

“So you’re Yomiga Eri... san.”

Orino-san swallowed her breath.

I see. Come to think of it, Orino-san had never met her. With a somewhat fearful expression, she gazed at her other self.

“That is no more than a name for convenience sake. I am your imitation. To be more precise—one who couldn’t become the Cage of Death Remnant.”

Her emotionless eyes looked back at the other identical in every way.

“It is an honor to meet you, original.”

Rare for Yomiga-san, a terribly cynical line. After saying that so expressionlessly, she turned her body towards Kai.

“My apologies, master. I am a little late.”

“I don’t mind. And the result”

I recalled.

The moment the truck was about to hit, I was taken off somewhere by Kirako-san.

I felt relieved when she said everyone was safe, but that was only referring to the truck’s collision. I never heard what happened after that.

After nodding, “Yes,” Yomiga-san spoke in a level voice.

“Kagurai Monyumi, Kagurai Gakuta, Kikyouin Yuzuki, Tamane, Creastia Crimson Christopher Kurisu, the aforementioned five have—

— All been killed.”

“—Hah?”

Kill... eh? T-they were kill... ed? All?

I couldn’t understand what she meant. I understood it so little I couldn’t close my hanging mouth.

A death proclamation came all too suddenly.

There was no way I could believe it, nor did I want to.

My brain denied the very notion of accepting it.

“... T-this has to be a lie. Right, Yomiga-san?”

My voice shook to a joking extent. I asked back, desperately clinging to the hope. But Yomiga-san didn’t say anything. “Good work,” Kai responded.

“Even those girls who fought for the sake of the world were far from reaching the 《Book Marker》. The replica’s power falls considerably when held against the original, but even so, she possesses more than enough power to kill them.”

He spoke levelly, an analysis composed to no end.

Nothing entered my ears.

Dead?

They’re all, dead?

While my thoughts were stagnating as if frozen over—Orino-san moved.

Presumably, she wasn't using any of her power.

It was an attack purely from her physical might.

A right straight.

Kai didn't dodge. I don't know whether he couldn't or just didn't, but I had a hunch it was the later. The right fist gouged into his left cheek. Kai lightly bent backwards, pressing both his hands against the stairs. From the edge of his lips, a single strand of blood flowed.

"Why!?"

Orino-san's shapely eyebrows were ruffled as she yelled out. Her face was bright red, her eyes oozed with tears.

"They all... had nothing to do with this! Why did you do something like that!? What do you take human lives for!?"

"... What are you so angry about? Why are you so panicked? It's nothing big, to you at least."

Kai wiped his mouth, and calmly declared.

"If they're dead—you just have to bring them back."

"...!?"

Orino-san opened her eyes wide in terror.

The 'power to do anything'.

I realized anew just how fearsome it was.

It really... can do anything. Anything, anything, anything.

"If you wish it, that alone will bring everyone back. And you can all laugh together, and get all dressed up for your happy ending."

"... Human life—"

"—Should never be thought of in such a way? Then overlook it. Value your own sense of ethics, and abandon them while having the power to save them. Just as I've done all the way here."

"....."

"If you say you want to revive them, so be it. From now on, just like that, you can simply let people live and die by your judgement alone. Save whoever you've taken a liking to, kill everyone you disdain, and the world will become a paradise of only the people you like—Orino-san, you can do whatever you

want. The world is in the palm of your hand.”

In a tone that stuck directly into his opponent’s chest, Kai spoke.

“Heavy, isn’t it? That’s the weight of the world.”

The weight of making the world however you want it.

The weight Kai had held from the moment he was born.

All of it was now leaning over Orino-san.

I—suddenly thought.

If the power to change the world however you wanted really did lie in those hands—then what was a person really to do.

“... I....”

All light had vanished from Orino-san’s eyes. She fell, collapsing to her knees.

Holding her head in both hands, pain and sorrow spread into her expression.

“... Don’t want it. This power... I don’t want it. Don’t want it, don’t want it...”

Looking as if she’d break at any moment, Orino-san muttered.

She was being crushed by the weight of the world.

“You don’t want it, huh. Isn’t it a bit late for that? When you’ve used it left and right all your life?”

As he said that, Kai stood from the steps. Standing before Orino-san huddling herself up on the ground, he grabbed her hair and forcefully stood her. With that uncharacteristic violent act, I hurriedly tried to stop him, but Yomiga-san beside me immediately held me by the shoulder. With her idiotically high strength, I was unable to move.

“Isn’t it a bit too self-serving to say you ‘don’t want it’ now? You surpassed the domain of man long ago, yet still wish to remain human... such selfishness disgusts me.”

“... I-I... I mean, I mean, up to now, that my power was something like this... I never knew...”

Orino-san answered in a sob-mingled voice.

Come to think of it, Orino-san’s psychokinesis was the result of her 《Book Marker》 being incomplete, apparently. So to change the phrasing, one could

say she had always been using that power.

I thought that was what Kai was trying to say.

But.

"Just because you don't know, there are still things you simply shouldn't do, aren't there?"

That didn't seem to be what he was talking about.

"You've actually already noticed it, haven't you?"

Kai said, peering deep into her eyes.

Right after, Orino-san's shoulders sprung up.

"Why haven't you looked Akira in the eye once today?"

Her perked shoulders, this time they had begun shaking.

Looking me in the eye?

Yeah, now that you mention it, that might be true. When she saved me from Utsurohara-san, and when she appeared in this space, Orino-san didn't try to look me in the eye.

Rather, for some reason, it was like she was keeping distant.
more so, like I was being avoided...

"It's because of your guilty conscience, right? You feel sorry, don't you? You want to avert your eyes from an unshakable fact, don't you?"

In regards to Kai's whispers, Orino-san finally covered her ears. Her attitude was like a small child cowering from a demon or monster.

What happened?

Just what could have—

"I'll tell you, Akira."

The question in my heart was answered by Kai. He released Orino-san's hair and turned towards me.

"Akira. Kagoshima Akira. The reason I put you at the center of the world is because you're someone who can't notice anything. Precisely because you couldn't notice, you were able to fulfill the role of the singularity point."

"That's... yeah, you already told me."

“Then why couldn’t you notice?”

The reason I couldn’t notice.

It was, ten years ago, because the lady in the strange suit told me.
Because she cast a spell on me.

“The lady in the strange suit... meaning Orino-san told me—”

“No, stop!”

Orino-san suddenly cried out. My body jerked in surprise.

But Kai didn’t stop.

In a tone more gentle than anything, he smoothly spun his words.

“That’s right. Those memories of ten years ago are your root. But Akira. What if those words were no metaphor, if they were true in the literal sense?”

“... Eh?”

“If they were Kagoshima Akira’s root in the true sense, what would you do?”

My roots?

In the true sense?

“Now then. This is changing the topic, but how about you try to recall the Cage of Death Remnant’s ability?”

Orino-san’s ability. 《Book Marker》.

The power to do anything—the power of complete rule—to freely commence actions in this world from outside its bounds.

— For example, controlling human nature is right in her ballpark.

“—!?”

All of a sudden, everything connected.

The missing piece was filled in as a single picture was drawn.

“Ten years before now—for the first time in her life, the Cage of Death Remnant showed a snapshot of her power. At that time, the seven-year-old boy before her eyes became the sacrifice.”

Various scenes flashed back to me.

The lady in a strange suit—Orino-san in a strange suit.
A seven-year-old me.

A boy who believed in heroes of justice.

The lady's wish—Orino-san's wish.

Wish?

She wished?

Orino-san... wished.

"The reason Kagoshima Akira couldn't notice...? the answer is simple. Because Orino Shiori wished it so. Your particular character was born from her ability. The personality you think of as your own—everything about your character is little more than a fabrication she thought up."

Meaning, he said.

"She drew up your character setting ten years ago."

Chapter 7: Kagoshima Akira

Let's take for instance my favorite color, blue.
I didn't have any particular reason, I always just kinda liked it.
It wasn't anything anyone decided for me, but something that was naturally decided over the course of my life.
... Was that really how it was?
Could it be it was only I who thought it was naturally decided, and truth be told, by someone's hand, I was controlled into liking the color blue?
There was a time I pondered such things in middle school.
Thinking back on it now, I do think it was a delusion of peak eighth-grade syndrome, but while only for a short period, there was a time I seriously considered it.
For example—ten years ago.
I believed in heroes of justice.
But one day, after meeting a certain individual, I completely stopped believing.
My view of life took a complete one-eighty degree turn.
As man does change—I changed.
A paradigm shift, or perhaps a change in faith, but whatever the case, my thought had changed.
I was sure it was a common enough occurrence.
For one to change their view while talking to someone, it can happen to anyone.
But it wasn't that I was 'forced to change,' I was 'convinced to change'. To the end, a voluntary change. That's why I thought it was so. I was sure my thoughts changed by my own will.
It looks like I was wrong.
I wasn't convinced, I was forced—even my own will truly wasn't my own.
I.
I, I, I—

"This isn't some cheap brainwashing. The moment the Cage of Death Remnant wished for it, Kagoshima Akira's character changed. From the sort of dreaming boy you can find anywhere—to an unnoticing man, he was set up as a

singular character. Like drafting up the character settings for some manga.”
“... U, uu, uuuuu.”

Behind Kai as he mercilessly continued his words, Orino-san had collapsed into tears.

Regret, self-admonishment, apology... various emotions turned to tears and overflowed from her eyes.

“Orino Shiori. Surely you must care for Akira. Of course you would, I mean, you’re the one who made him.”

He continued relentlessly raining his words down on a weeping Orino-san. While his tone was condemning, at the same time, I also got the feeling he was growing desperate.

It even looked like he was perpetuating a childish harassment.

“To you, Kagoshima Akira must have been the ideal man. To someone who fought for the sake of the world, Kagoshima Akira could become the perfect ‘symbol of an everyday life to return to’, lending salvation to your heart. As you wished it, and as you made it. You made an innocent young boy out to be a man to your tastes, did you? Haha, it’s practically a reverse Genji plan.”

“Uu”

“That easily explains Kagoshima Akira seeing through Yomiga Eri’s perfect imitation today. It wasn’t the result of love or bonds or some convenient contrived power. If he was the ideal man for Orino Shiori, then at the very least, it wouldn’t be strange for him to see through a fake Orino Shiori with one glance.”

“Uuuuu”

“Orino Shiori. Don’t you think you’ve done something terrible? Even if you didn’t know, you used your power to do something you can never take back. And yet, so late in the game, you’ll spout such ideals and deny your own power?”

“... Uu, uaaaaa.”

Her face still hidden, Orino-san continued to leak sobs. And for just a moment, after raising her face to look at me, she again lowered it deeply, until she was almost bowing.

“... I’m sorry, Kagoshima-kun.”

She said.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry... I’m sorry, I’m sorry... I’m sorry, I’m sorry... I, I, what I... hic, I’m sorry... Uu, sorry...”

Like a broken music box, she repeated words of apology.

“I... just... with Kagoshima-kun... u. UUuA, I’m sorry... sorry, sorry... forgive me...”

Her head rubbing against the ground, she pleaded at me in a tear-shaken voice.

A voice that made me want to reflexively cover my ears, and a scene that made me want to reflexively cover my eyes.

“...”

And so. That’s why I cleared my ears and looked right at her.

My body naturally moved.

Standing from the stairs, I walked over to Orino-san.

In my mind, I mused if my experience from a few hours ago was doing its work. My awakening was, in the end, just a misunderstanding, but seeing how my body could naturally start to motion, even if it didn’t go so far as awakening, perhaps I’d at least matured some.

It is when you want to cover your eyes you open them wide, and when you want to cover your ears you listen carefully.

That was something I learned not too long ago.

“Orino-san, raise your face.”

I crouched down in front of her. She slowly lifted it. Her face a right mess with tears entered my eyes.

“Now wipe away those tears.”

I said, holding out a handkerchief.

“Because I didn’t have a handkerchief on me at yesterday’s party, I couldn’t do anything. That’s why I decided to carry one today.”

“Kagoshima-kun...”

After taking the cloth from me, Orino-san gripped it tight in front of her chest.

“... So you’re saying you forgive her?”

A low voice resounded beside me. Kai was making a displeased face.

“Akira. Your personality is in its entirety something thrown together by Orino Shiori. You were manipulated in a way most convenient to her, it’s something like an artificial program. Do you really have nothing to think in regards to this situation?”

“It’s not that I think nothing of it, but... yeaah. Well, there is just one thing I’d like to say. One thing, or rather, just one word.”

I grasped the general situation.

It did seem my personality was something Orino-san made. I couldn’t judge from where to where had been manufactured, and perhaps my hobbies, my height, my voice and my tone, all sorts of other parts were all crafted by Orino Shiori.

Whilst standing on top of that fact, all I had to say could be summed up in one word.

“So?”

I said.

Kai’s eyes opened wide. After that, his brow furrowed a bit.

“... So? Is that really all you have to say?”

“Yep. That’s about it.”

“And why’s that... confronting the fact your identity was overthrown from the root, why are you able to remain so calm? How do you accept a fact that negates yourself in its entirety...?”

“I don’t really have a good answer for that. Yeaah, well, I’m still me and all... even if Orino-san made me who I am, that doesn’t really change the fact that I’m me.”

And, I said.

“Humans in the end, to a greater or lesser extent, live exposed to personality manipulation and mind control, don’t they? For example, let’s say there was a person who admired a singer they saw on TV as a kid, and decided they wanted

to become a singer... if you want to make it sound bad, you might be able to say she was brainwashed by the singer on TV, but that's not something bad, is it?"

"... The 『Book Marker』's rule over personality is something completely different. I simply termed it mind control to make it easy for you to comprehend, and its nature is far more malic—"

"Yeah, I'm good. No need for all the hard stuff."

With a bitter smile, I shrugged my shoulders.

"My head's about to blow out here. Anyways, I'm me."

When I said that, Kai made an unbearable expression.
I turned towards Orino-san once again.

"Hey, Orino-san. A little while ago, those things I said to Oshiri-chan... was that you turned little?"

Then thinking about it calmly, I said some outrageous things.
And playing doctor...

... Yeah. Well, we're at a serious scene for now, so let's just let that slide.

"Back then, do you remember what I told you on the way back home? When you told me you were scared of not being you anymore?"

— If Orino-san stops being Orino-san, I have no way of knowing what will happen then. I might come to hate her, and we might stop being friends.

— But, if Orino-san stays Orino-san... if the most important part inside of Orino-san stays as it always has been, then I think I'll always want to be with her.

Orino-san raised her face to look at me. I got the feeling that was the first time our eyes met today.

I took another look at her. Her eyes were clouded with tears, her face was flushed, and the traces of past tears remained. I saw the sensitive sort of girl you could find anywhere.

She hadn't changed, I thought.

While all sorts of things dramatically changed, not a single part of her base had. It seems Orino-san was an existence created by Kai. It seems she had some astounding power called the 『Book Marker』. It seems the choice of whether

she inherited Kai's objective to create the 'neverending story', or killed Kai and became the new god was approaching. What's more, it seems Orino-san was the one who wrote up my character.

Well.

It looks like there are some complicated circumstances going around, but leaving aside that tiresome stuff.

"Orino-san, you're Orino-san."

I said.

"Orino-san, you're Orino-san. It was important so I said it twice."

"....."

"Orino-san, you're Orino-san. It's important, so I'll say it as many times as it takes."

"... Kagoshima-kun."

There, Orino-san suddenly clung onto me, pressing her face into my chest, she wailed like a baby.

"Kagoshima-kun, Kagoshima-kun, Kagoshima-kun, Kagoshima-kun... Uwaaaaaaah."

"Yep. That's right. I'm Kagoshima Akira. And you're Orino Shiori-san."

I said what was obvious.

It was obvious so I said it.

"... In the end, on top of accepting all the facts, Kagoshima Akira accepts even the 《Book Marker》's human nature manipulation... no. Yeah, so be it. It's kinda getting idiotic to think about..."

Kai gave a slight smile.

"Really, whenever I'm with you, you always throw me off, Akira."

But soon his smile vanished and looking down at me in Orino-san's embrace, he spoke in an ice-cold tone.

"Then... what will you do? Even if you've forgiven Orino Shiori, that doesn't mean you've forgiven me too, does it? If you think you can so unconditionally forgive the one who killed your comrades, that is by no means kindness, it is

just insensibility.”

“Yeaah. Well about that.”

I tried asking what was bothering me.

“Is everyone really dead?”

“... What do you mean?”

“No, I mean, that’s just what Yomiga-san said, right? It’s not as if she actually showed the corpses or anything. And even if you say that all of a sudden, it would be harder for me to actually believe you.”

“... You’re just not accepting the facts.”

“Perhaps. Ah, but more than Yomiga-san, I’d much rather like to believe in everyone. Just this morning, I was surprised to find out Yomiga-san was quite the liar. She was even going parading around pretending to be Orino-san.”

I supported Orino-san up and stood with her.

“Hey, Kai.”

And—

Head on, I faced my childhood friend.

“As you said and as you aimed for, up to this moment, I really never did notice anything. Of course, there’s no surprise that I was actually pretending the whole time. Like an idiot, I couldn’t connect the dots—but you know.”

Said I.

Self-deprecating, and yet proudly, I put it all to mouth.

“Just because I couldn’t connect, doesn’t mean I didn’t connect.”

I felt connected the whole time.

I was one who couldn’t notice, but I formed still the sort of unnoticing human relations.

I formed the human relations only I could form.

“That’s why I’ll believe. There’s no way they could die so easily.”

Kai glared at me with the eyes of one looking at a child who wouldn’t listen.

“Give it a rest already. They’re already dead. If you want and hopes of meeting them again, your only option is to revive them through the 《Book

Marker》—”

“— Gyahahahahah!”

From behind, I heard a belittling laugh.

This was, this laugh was—

“Gyahahah! It’s no good, I can’t hold it in anymore!? The hell’s with that brat’s face? Just how proud are you, making a bad pun out of ‘connect’, Gyahahah!”

“H-hey, Gakuta! Pipe it down!”

An exchange I was already accustomed to.

A one-man charade through ventriloquism—or so it looked, when it really was a comedy routine between brother and sister.

“Ahh, looks like it’s too late, Kagurai. That one totally gave us away. Well, it was getting’ to be a pain to keep hidin’, so isn’t this just the right time? Alright, Tamane, please get up.”

“FfaAAA... what, is it already over?”

That unnatural respectful tone for her sister—actually, the natural respect to her family elder.

“Kurisu, you get up too.”

“... Hmm? A-aah! I-I’m sorry! I wasn’t sleeping!”

“Apologize or make excuses, choose one... ‘n wait, can’t you do anything about those side effects?”

“Urk... I can’t. When I use that magic, I just get sleepy, I say.”

Naked except for a robe—or perhaps not, as she wore a garment composed of magic.

“Umm... alright, then let’s come out. No, still... can’t we make it a bit more dramatic? Like the sky suddenly splitting, and us thudding down from there...”

From behind the shrine’s main altar, without any particular theatrics, they just normally walked out. One after another, the people I knew appeared.

“Don’t tell me—”

Kai’s eyes opened wide in shock. It was the first time I had ever seen him so

surprised.

Orino-san was in her own way making a face as if she couldn't believe it. But soon, her expression sparkled.

"Everyone!"

Raising a cry for joy, she raced over to them. Not a ghost or a program, those girls in the flesh gently welcomed Orino-san.

That's good... I felt relieved from the bottom of my heard. I said something cool about believing, but I was actually terribly anxious, and horribly afraid. I almost cried tears of joy. As I was desperately holding back my tears, Kaguraisenpai came to tease me.

"Hey now, Kagoshima. What's with that miserable face? Didn't you say you believed in us?"

"Well of course I believed... that doesn't mean I wasn't worried... but how..."

"—So that's how it is."

Kai breathed a slight sigh. It was a sigh of acceptance and resignation.

"I've been had. I never even imagined I would be betrayed by you."

A bitter smile on his lips, he gazed at Yomiga-san standing still to the side of the steps.

"Using your 《Book Marker》, you perfectly concealed their presence to hide them from the enemy search function Orino Shiori and I carry out unconsciously. Even if you're incomplete, with your power, you should be able to do that much. Slight as it may be, the only thing able to oppose the 《Book Marker》 is one with the very same 《Book Marker》."

"....."

Yomiga-san kept her silence, she hid her face a bit.

[IMAGE]

"... I don't blame you. Your resentment is inevitable. I've put you through quite some pain for the sake of my goal."

"—My apologies. Master."

Still hanging her head, Yomiga-san spoke. It wasn't in her usual indifferent

tone, but a voice shaking in anxiety and conflict.

"I—was unable to kill those girls. I did not intend to betray, and I do not resent you. Even now I am thankful that you afforded a role to a failure wannabe such as myself."

However, Yomiga-san said.

"The moment Kagoshima Akira told me, 'You're Yomiga-san, not Orino-san'... I was happy. I was happy enough to cry. Yomigaeri—Yomiga Eri. It is my name my master thought up for me."

"... I thought it up on the spot, it's just a bad pun. Same as my Shinosekai."
"Yet still, I've been called by it time and again."

A tear passed down Yomiga-san's cheek. Not a fragment of her usual coolness remained, she bit her lip and snifflled her nose.

At first, I'm sure it was just a name for convenience.

I'm sure it was no more than a fake name. But once repeatedly called so, that name began to hold a true meaning.

"I... don't want to be someone's replica or alternative anymore. I want to be a single human called Yomiga Eri. And—master, I want you to become a single human called Shinose Kai..."

"....."

Kai didn't say anything.

At a glance, the two confronting one another looked like a scene of separation. A servant requested release from their master, they demanded independence. But by no means did this mean a separation.

More so, it was the opposite.

Yomiga-san's attitude and words brimmed with thoughts for Kai. Precisely because she thought of Kai more than anyone, at this very moment she was trying to part from him.

"... Haha. For things to not go my way to such an extent, it's actually refreshing."

With an unnaturally cheery smile, Kai spoke. The power left his body, he slumped into a seat on the ground.

“Why won’t it work out...”

His face down, he leaked his words for the ground. Those were his true feelings he carelessly spilled, and I thought of them like the screams of his heart. Everyone’s gaze showered down on a sunk down Kai. Eventually raising his face, he looked up at me with pleading eyes.

“Hey, Akira. What am I supposed to do?”

From there, he slowly looked over everyone else.

“Anyone, someone please tell me...”

No one could answer his question. With grave features, they gazed at a god who had lost his direction.

Unable to watch him after he’d lost any and everything, I ended up opening my mouth.

Presumptuously—I turned to God and gave my opinion.

“You don’t have to do anything, do you?”

Kai looked at me. I continued on.

“For example, there are plenty of people out there who complain at Japan’s politicians, right? ‘Get a grip,’ ‘the hell are you doing,’ ‘and you’re supposed to represent our country?’ just like that. But see, if you told those people, ‘Then why don’t you do it?’ I’m sure they wouldn’t be able to say anything anymore...”

If you were suddenly made prime minister someday and they told you, you can do whatever you want, just make Japan better, most people would end their term without accomplishing anything.

“Umm... it might be easier to understand if I put it in manga or novel terms.”

I was rambling on the spot, so it did seem my words lacked coherency. But I said what I wanted. This might be the last time, after all.

“For example, let’s say there’s someone who complained because they didn’t like the work. You should’ve done this, you should’ve done that, someone who gave out such selfish orders. But just because of that, giving those people ‘the right to freely change the story’... would likely be meaningless.”

The right to change your favorite manga or anime however you liked.

At a glance you might think it's a right like a dream.
Increase the parts for the character you like, pair together your favorite couplings, kill the characters you hate, develop the story however you want to, keep on adding new settings—
If they did that... I'm sure they would no longer be able to like it anymore.
What the reader sought after wasn't something like that.

"Kai. I don't know when, but you said it before. Humans are all readers of a book called 'self'... in that case, humans are just right to complain about it."

It's impossible for there to be a book where everything's perfectly to their tastes.

For every character you like, there's a character you hate, when you thought it was a boring story, there might be a surprising reversal, when you thought a new setting that was just an afterthought was added on, that was in itself surprisingly interesting—

It's a repeat of damn boring, and decent enough.

That is what makes—a novel.

Just because you can do anything, that doesn't mean you should do anything. Just like that, the theory the What-if Booth is the strongest crumbles all too easily.

"Even if God doesn't do a thing, I'm sure this world can get on."

"So I don't have to do anything, eh..."

After muttering in a fading-out voice, Kai opened his mouth wide and raised his voice in a laugh. Nice and clear, it was a laugh as if the demon had fallen away.

"Hahahah. That's harsh. You're completely denying my very existence."

"... Well, perhaps. But does it really matter? Your dream didn't come true, and everything you've done may have been pointless, but that doesn't mean you have to die, does it?"

"What would you do if I told you I wanted to die?"

"Then of course I'd stop you. We're friends, childhood friends at that."

"I see."

Kai started laughing again.

Throwing down everything he held, he laughed with his body and soul. It was a form of Kai I'd never seen before, and I presumed this was the first time Kai had ever laughed like this.

"You've got me. It's my complete loss, Akira."

I don't really remember what happened after that.

No, let me say this.

From here on are—the things I don't remember.

Kurisu-chan was still under the side-effects of her magic, she immediately fell sound asleep.

Kagurai and Kikyouin closed in on Kai once he declared his defeat, "Let me get a punch in," they asserted. While Kai solemnly accepted that harshness and kindness, Yomiga-san stepped in at the last second to save him.

And of all things, she suddenly confessed to Kai.

Wailing out, she embraced Kai with all her strength, speaking of love with such force it made me embarrassed to listen to.

Because of that, the mood turned real dubious.

The serious mood to smack him and settle the score had completely gone off somewhere.

Well, seeing Kai's face red and bashful was fresh and interesting.

Just judging from that reaction, perhaps Kai was a virgin. Well, lasts bosses can be virgins now and again... or so I thought something so pointless when,

"Kagoshima-kun, here, thank you."

Orino-san returned my handkerchief. Her tears had already stopped. While she made her normal gentle expression, she did look somewhat anxious.

"... What should I do now?"

While it felt like it was all over, there was still something left to do.

Orino-san was still equipped with her power.

And I was left having noticed.

"Orino-san. I've been thinking, but is that power able to erase itself?"

A power to do anything.

In that case, it should be able to erase that very power.

Of course, that was faultfinding, or rather, a theory that stabbed into a

contradiction of words, so I didn't know if that was really possible.

"Yeah. I think it can."

Orino-san said.

Well there you go.

"... But is that alright? 《Book Marker》 is a power he spent an uncountable amount of time and effort to make, and many sacrifices have been paid for the power and yet..."

"You think it's a waste?"

"No. Just a little irresponsible..."

"Both you and Kai have too strong a sense of responsibility. I think you can be a bit more self-serving here. It's fine to think about the world, but before that, you need to think about yourself."

"... Perhaps."

Orino-san gave a small nod.

"So about what we're going to do specifically..."

"I'll leave it up to you."

I said, and lowered myself onto the ground. A great many things had worn me out. There, Orino-san plopped into a seat beside me.

"Is it fine?"

"Well why not?"

"... Hah," Orino-san breathed a slight breath and smiled. "When I talk to you, Kagoshima-kun, it starts to feel downright idiotic to think too hard."

"Was that praise?"

"Yeah. Tentatively."

And for a little while after that, we spoke about things that exceedingly didn't matter. We didn't talk about anything specific. I said I'd leave it to Orino-san, but I could imagine what she would try to do.

My relation with her—my relation with these girls, as I thought it should be as it is. That was what they wished for, and what I wished for as well.

"Now then,"

I stood and looked at the sky.

"We should be getting back to our everyday lives."

[IMAGE]

Epilogue

And then I woke up.

“.....”

Oh, so it was just a dream.

It does seem all the battles up to now had all been the happenings of a dream.
A dream ending of all things.

“T-Tezuka-sensei’s gonna be pissed...”

An incomprehensible worry passing through my half-asleep head, I heard a tapping sound on the door.

“Kagoshima-kuuun, are you awake? Can I come in?”

It was Orino-san’s voice. “Go ahead,” I reflexively answered, and the door opened, and Orino-san appeared in her school uniform.

“Good morning, Kagoshima-kun.”

“Good morning... huh? Why are you here so early in the morning?”

“How long do you plan to daze out? Have you already forgotten what day it is?”

I frantically worked my head and recalled what happened yesterday.

“... Ah, I see. We had your birthday party yesterday, did we? Everyone apart from me and you were downed, and stayed over at my place...”

“Right. So right now, I’m in the middle of waking them up. Because a certain someone slept in.”

“Ahaha. I’m sorry.”

I hurriedly sprung up from the bed.

That’s right, I remembered. Truth be told, I intended to wake up early and wake everyone up, but it looks like I went and slept in.

“I kinda... saw a strange dream. I think that’s why I overslept.”

“Hmmm. What sort of dream?”

“Weeeell, you see, I get the feeling the contents will sound idiotic if I actually say them aloud but—Kagurai-senpai was actually a cybersoldier from the

future, and the Gakuta-kun she usually speaks to with ventriloquism was actually her brother of all people. Kikyouin-san was an onmyouji, and Tama-chan was a nine-tailed fox. Kurisu-chan was a witch from another world. Her name was really, really long and I couldn't remember it at all. Orino-san—was the child of god or something, something like the messiah of this world, whatever it was, some amazing existence.”

“.....”

“So anyways, and here's the kicker, turns out Kai was the last boss. Ah, Kai's my childhood friend. You've met him before, haven't you? And then your lookalike, a girl called Yomiga-san appeared and—”

I spoke about the dream I saw.

The absurd and incoherent, all-over-the-place dream.

I spoke of a dream like a manga or anime.

There's an established theory that there's nothing more boring than listening to someone else tell you about a dream, but Orino-san amusedly listened to my story. She was smiling, but her smile also looked somewhat lonesome. I got the feeling she was forcing herself to smile.

But, as I thought, she laughed jovially.

“—And like that, in the very end, I awoke to the power sleeping within me—*《Dog Ear》*, I beat the bad guys black and blue and we all had a happy ending.”

“... The original work was bastardized somewhere down the line.”

“Eh? What do you mean?”

“I-it's nothing! Ahahah.”

For some reason, she sounded panicked as her gaze swam here and there.

“N-now! Let's hurry and clean up so we can go to school!”

The second term began, and a certain day after about a week had gone by.

“It sure is peaceful.”

I earnestly muttered in the afterschool clubroom.

In the computer club's members, today as well, all five members were assembled.

Kagurai Monyumi.

Kikyouin Yuzuki.

Kurisu Crimson Kuria.

Orino Shiori.

Kagoshima Akira.

It wasn't as if we were doing anything particular, we just all gathered and lounged around.

"Are you bored of peace?"

Orino-san asked. I made a vague smile.

"It's boring if you want to call it that. But not bad. I do like to take it easy like this, after all."

"I see."

Came Orino-san's gentle smile.

"And Kagurai-senpai's homework is finally done."

"... Kagoshima, quit dragging on that joke.'

Kagurai-senpai said fed-up. There, Kikyouin-san and Kurisu-chan who'd been playing hanafuda mixed into the conversation.

"In the end, humans are those who live asking for the moon. When war comes, they seek peace, and once peace comes, the word boredom graces their lips..."

"The grass is greener on the other side. Ah, that's Ino-Shika-Chou."

"No way!"

"And that's the twelfth round. It's my win."

"Uwah... I lost again. Kurisu, you really are strong... I had a bit of confidence..."

"Ehehe. I regularly compete with a really strong person."

"Ahh, now I'm burnin'. It's been a while, I should go train under Tamane-sama again."

Just like that, a leisurely time slipped by.

Ahh, it really is nice. This loose feeling.

If only this time could continue forever—the moment I thought so, it didn't continue at all.

First was Orino-san.

"M-my stomach!"

Next Kurisu-chan.

"T-this magic is!?"

And Kikyouin-san.

"!? I-is that true, Tamane-sama!?"

Finally, Kagurai-senpai.

"S-say what!? Damn, it just had to be when the PC's under maintenance... no choice but to use another room's...!"

And well, like that.

By the time I noticed it, the members apart from myself had disappeared somewhere.

"... They're all quite busy."

Yeaah.

It's been quite a while since I felt like this. Letting out a single breath, I stood from my seat. The weather was nice, somehow or another I tried opening the window.

A refreshing blue sky, the same townscape as ever entered my eyes.

"... Huh?"

As I was enjoying the scenery, I spotted Kirako-san walking in the distance. Not in the movie suit, she clad herself in girlish fashion. This was inadvertently the first time I saw her in casual clothing.

To Kirako-san's side, was a boy around middle-school age. A young boy who looked good in his glasses and suspenders. Was that her little brother? There's no way he could be her boyfriend.

As I gazed absentmindedly, the bespectacled two took out their cellphones simultaneously. Gazing at the screens, their expressions stiffened at once, and they ran off somewhere.

Some urgent job?

Well, no use thinking about it.

A breeze blew through the window. The curtain swayed grandly. While it was a considerably strong wind, the photo on the windowsill was in a proper picture frame so it was safe.

It was a photo the five of us happily took together.
It was quite recently, but for some reason, I got the feeling it was quite a long time ago.
As I gazed at the photo with a warm feeling, the cellphone in my pocket shook.
Of all things, it was a call from my childhood friend Kai.

‘Hey, Akira.’
“Kai. Been a while.”

It had been around a week since I spoke with Kai like this.
On the day of the entrance ceremony a week ago, he suddenly said he was “Going on a journey to find myself”. I considered stopping him, but, “I want to try seeing this world again,” he told me with especially clear eyes, so I couldn’t find it in me.

“So how’s the trip going?”
‘It’s only just begun, but so far, I’m having fun. The view from here’s breathtaking. Sand as far as you can see, the blue sky goes on with no end. The dry wind stroking my skin has a nice elegance to it.’

It seemed he was in some sort of desert.
The Sahara, or Taklamakan, or someone else entirely.

‘It really is a wonderful tourist spot, Tottori’s dunes.’
“.....”

Tottori sand dunes. One of the three great sand dunes of Japan.
So he’s still here.

“Kai... didn’t you say you were seeing the world?”
‘What are you talking about? Japan’s a proper part of the world.’

I mean, that’s technically true.
But that’s a really small scale, or how should I put it... no, on the contrary, was he thinking on a larger scale?

“Come to think of it, is Yomiga-san doing good?”
‘She’s doing great. She’s right next to me right now, want to switch over?’
“No, I’m fine. Send her my regards.”

Kai’s journey to find himself was accompanied by Yomiga-san. Isn’t that just a

vacation? I thought, but I won't retort.

After leaving a bit of time, Kai breathed out a thoughtful sigh.

'... It's the first time I've seen the world for my sake alone. It's all so new, and so interesting. I thought this world was just a book I'd already finished reading, but it seems I was conceited.'

"....."

'A truly great novel's interesting no matter how many times you read it. This world's still got promise in it yet.'

"That's good."

I laughed, he laughed.

'Ah, sorry, Akira. Yomiga-san's puffing out her cheeks and pouting, I should hang up.'

... It seems Yomiga-san's completely entered her Dere period.
So she's inflating her cheeks and pouting? I'd like to see that.

"Yeah. Got it. Well then, 'cya."

'Ahh... Akira. One last thing.'

"Mn? What?"

"You've actually already noticed everything, haven't you?"

"....."

'One week ago, Orino Shiori used her 『Book Marker』 to alter the world. It looks like she's placed some complicated adjustments, but—to put it simply, everything's been returned to normal.'

"....."

'To Kagoshima Akira, all he experienced that day became the happenings of a dream, and you continued the same relation with Orino Shiori and her comrades of not noticing—or so it should have been.'

"....."

'Orino Shiori definitely wished it so... but in the depths of her heart, surely she couldn't help but end up wishing "I want him to know". That's not all. She probably thought this too. "I want Kagoshima Akira to protect me". At the same time, didn't you think, "If I could, I want to protect these girls"?'

"....."

‘At that moment, the ability began to transfer. By her wishing, and you accepting, the 『Book Marker』became Kagoshima Akira’s. As a result, you took undertook all the burden. As its new host in Orino Shiori’s place, you inherited powers surpassing god.’

Shiori’s place.

In place of the bookmark.

Dog Ear.

‘... In the end, it just shows Orino Shiori was more of a girl than she thought, and Kagoshima Akira was more of a boy than he thought. But Akira. Are you really alright with that? That way of life, even for you, there’s no way you can endure for—’

I spoke

“Eh? What did you say?”

‘.....’

“The reception must be bad. I can barely hear you.”

‘... No, it’s nothing.’

We gave our simple partings and finished the call. I placed the phone into my pocket, gazing out the window once more. When I looked up, I saw a sky reaching out with no end in sight.

Below that sky, on this day once more, someone would be greeted with happiness, another with misfortune. Where I couldn’t see it, a story I didn’t know about might unfold.

Perhaps—a hero of justice was fighting unknown to man.

But.

And only hypothetically speaking.

I am me, and I think I’d like to enjoy the everyday life I love.

I want to smile innocently.

I want to smile for someone’s sake.

It was what the hero of justice wished for.

And so it was.

The relationship I came to realize.

Postscript

No, just notice already.

This work that started with such sentiment is already on its sixth volume. time-wise, I guess it's been around a year. I don't know if that's a long or short time, but personally speaking, that year went by in the blink of an eye. This piece was my, Nozomi Kouta's debut work as an author, and winner of the rookie of the year award. Meaning it was a story I hadn't even considered for continued publication, and turning it into a series was a considerable hassle... actually, not

really.

Honestly speaking even before it placed, I was thinking I want to do this, I want to do that, so I managed to make it a series without too many hardships. I arbitrarily went and wrote a second volume before it was even greenlit and all...

Well of course, it's not like everything went according to my

initial plan, but I somehow managed to have it reach the point I was aiming for.

By the way, I have four whole pages for this postscript. I asked my editor to make this time a little on the longer side, but... when I actually get to writing it, I have nothing to say, and now I'm in a right pickle, aren't I.

That being the case, I'm going to borrow this space to divulge some background information on the main cast like you'd find in a fan book. Don't take it the wrong way, I'm just doing what I want to.

This contains some spoilers for the main story, so do take

caution.

① Kurisu Crimson Kuria.

A witch. Imagined as the child of a father who fell into a template summoning fantasy. Upon nearing the conclusion, I get the feeling she also became an exhibitionist character. I'm happy if someone noticed, but Kurisu's mark is a six pointed star, while Kikyouin's is five pointed.

② Kagurai Monyumi.

Time traveler from the future. Personally, she's the character I have the highest penchant for. The reason being, it is no

exaggeration to say the fact this piece was completed was largely thanks to Kagurai.

By the initial plan, the heroines that appeared were supposed to be a psychic, a magician and an onmyouji. And yet, while I could think up gags for them, I couldn't make a coherent story—was the situation I fell into. Yet one day, the idea of a future person struck like lightning, and as a chain of events from that, the material of travelling into the main character's childhood, and the 'fist f*ck' gag came in a flash. From there, it all went so fast, and with the flip of a wrist, my contest submission piece, the first volume was completed.

③ Kikyouin Yuzuki.

An Onmyouji. For the aforementioned reason, her part started from volume 2. A combo with the nine-tailed fox Tamane. All the girls who came out in the first volume were sweet on the

protagonist, so how about I put out a bit of a harsher person, I thought, and she became far harsher than I expected... well, nothing we can do about it, I mean, it's diaper play after all.

④ Orino Shiori.

A psychic... or so it seems—was her character. The truth is, her design has her 'wearing black tights under her uniform'. It was something that was decided from the rough draft, and yet, there was never a chance to see them in the illustrations, and this volume, when they finally appeared, it wasn't actually her...

⑤ Shinose Kai.

The Last boss—as he is, yet another protagonist. I think the main story is Kagoshima Akira's story, but I get the feeling it's simultaneously Shinose Kai's. He wears his kinagashi left-side forward, but as the main character is unable to notice this mistake, I had a dilemma of not being able to include it as a point in the story.

⑥ Kagoshima Akira.

The Protagonist—and yet, as far as he goes, a side character. The densest man in light novel history, apparently. He does not react to malice or ill intent, and will corner the heroines through thick and thin, a brute in a sense. There were various things in the end of this volume, but I arbitrarily believe Kagoshima will continue to live in a Kagoshima way.

That is all. There are other things I want to write about, but let's just end things here.

Well then, my thanks to the following.

My presiding editor who gave all sorts of advice for this work. I don't think I'd ever be able to write this work on my own

power. I am truly thankful.

The illustrator Takatsuki Ichi-sama. Thank you for all the

wonderful illustrations each and every time. The illustrations you send me always become the driving force behind my pen.

And the greatest thanks to all you readers who read all the way to volume six.

The reason I could continue this work so far was solely thanks to you.

Well then, if the chance arises, let's meet again.

– Nozomi Kouta